

A Chinese spree



Travels in China, Tibet, Hong-Kong, 2014

Patrick and Louise Krohn

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by PATRICK AND LOUISE KROHN

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Patrick



Louise



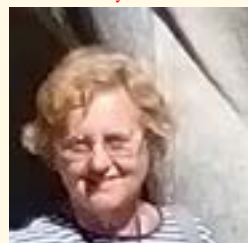
Tricia



Cliff



Lynn



Kathleen

The annual Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as the Moon Festival, is held on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the Chinese calendar. In 2014, this fell on September 8, the first of our 22-day China Spree tour to China, Tibet, and Hong Kong. A very propitious day to start a tour!

Having arrived at our hotel in Beijing at about 6 p.m. the night before, after a nine-hour flight from Vancouver, we were scheduled to meet our tour guide and our 10 fellow travelers in the hotel lobby the next morning at 8 a.m.

We soon found out that, not only did we have an exceptional tour guide, Sunny, knowledgeable, personable, and competent, but the rest of our group was just as remarkable.

There were our good friends John and Pauline with whom we've taken many trips before.

Bill and Judi from Los Angeles were there, too—the “oldest” but definitely not the “feeblest” (that would probably be me!) who seemed to have brought enough luggage to last them for three months.

There were Paul and Mary from Arizona who embodied the definition of “seasoned travelers” and managed the three weeks with only two carry-on luggage pieces. I can't remember any place we'd previously visited that they had not already seen.

There were Cliff and Tricia from Georgia who'd filled their luggage with lots of snack food lest they should get hungry at any point during the trip.

And to complete what would become one of the best groups that we've had the pleasure of travelling with were Kathleen and her daughter Lynn who came from Minnesota.

We were all “good travelers”: no whining or complaining, always on time, inquisitive, and good humoured. We were “Sunny's family.”



Sunny



Paul



Mary



John



Pauline



Bill



Judi

DAY 1: BEIJING

Our first day started with a visit to the infamous Tiananmen Square. Since 1989, we have tended to associate Tiananmen Square with images of tanks, protests, and riot police. Of course, when we got there, it was nothing of the sort—just a gigantic and somewhat busy open city square with neither trees nor benches and under heavy security.

“Tiananmen Square is a massive meeting place that can accommodate up to 600,000 people. In the middle is the 38-metre Monument to the People's Heroes. Along the edges are the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, the Great Hall of the People, and the National Museum of China. The square lies between two ancient gates: the Tiananmen to the north, which leads to the Forbidden City, and the Qianmen to the south.”¹

Even though it was still fairly early in the morning, there was already a long queue of people waiting to visit the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, perhaps because it was a holiday (the Moon Festival).

Next stop: the Forbidden City. This was not what we had imagined. It is, after all, one of the oldest palaces in the world, and we expected to be able to walk through at least a few of the 90 palaces and 8,000 rooms that make up



Tiananmen Square: Monument to the People's Heroes,



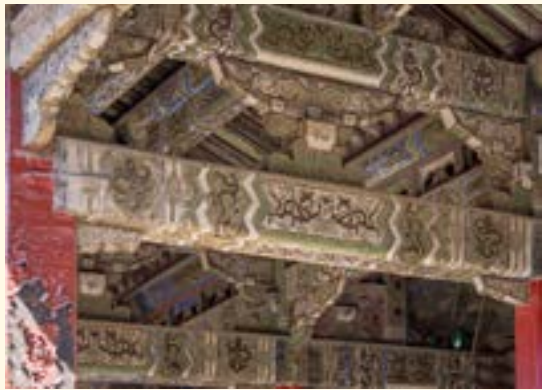
Tiananmen Square: People queuing to visit the Mausoleum of Mao-Zedong



Forbidden City: roof detail



Forbidden City: roof detail



Forbidden City: ceiling detail



Forbidden City: the Empress' bed



Forbidden City



Lion on guard at the Forbidden City

the Forbidden City. But no: we could only view some of the rooms through closed windows or open but gated doors. For the most part, we only saw the outside of the buildings. Later on, looking at some images on the Internet, I realized that for a real appreciation of the Forbidden City, you have to see it from above; only then do you get a sense of its magnitude and its complexity. But from our vantage point, it was rather disappointing.

By then it was lunchtime. We took a rickshaw and rode through one of Beijing's Hutong neighborhood, "the famous ancient city alleys which have been disappearing from Beijing's city map every year as ring roads, viaducts, skyscrapers and modern homes creep into China's fast-growing capital city."² Our ride took us to a private

house where we had our first introduction to Chinese cuisine.

Food was an important part of our tour. Sunny told us during the first day's briefing: "In previous trips, we tried to offer Western-style food because many of our clients found Chinese food too monotonous, but after a while, we found out that people liked American-style food prepared by Chinese chefs even less! So we have gone back to offering Chinese meals." Meals typically included about 10 different dishes. There would usually be rice or noodle dishes, a pot of soup, servings of chicken and beef and of course vegetables of all kinds, plus the inevitable watermelon slices that signified the end of the meal.

I will confess that I am not particularly adventurous when it comes to ethnic food. I was a bit apprehensive about eating "authentic Chinese food" for the entire three weeks but, in the end, I was pleasantly surprised to find that I enjoyed most meals. Patrick, on the other hand, was not so impressed; he felt most meals were not much better than what we find in a typical Vancouver food court.



Rickshaw traffic jam



Preparing Peking Ducks



Enjoying a rickshaw ride



Lotus flower blooming on Kunming Lake

After lunch, we went to visit the Summer Palace. We admired Kunming Lake and its blossoming lotus flowers, walked along the “Long Corridor” famous for its rich painted decoration of more than 14,000 paintings, and ended at the Marble Boat, a lakeside pavilion first erected in 1755 during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor and later restored by the Empress Dowager Cixi in 1893.

We ended the day with dinner at a restaurant that had been in business for 600 years and specialized in Peking duck. As it was John’s birthday, we finished the meal with a most welcome ice cream birthday cake.

All we could do when we finally made it back to the hotel was fall into bed, absolutely exhausted! And that’s how it would be for the rest of the trip.

DAY 2: BEIJING

Three events were planned for the day.

Our first stop was to the Sacred Way of the Ming Tombs. This was a lovely walk along a granite path lined with graceful weeping willows. On each side of the path were 18 pairs of greater-than-life stone statues, 24 animals (lion, camel, elephant, and horse, plus 2 mythological creatures, the xiezhi and the qilin) and 12 human figures (including the general, civil officials, and meritorious officials).

The qilin and xiezhi are mythical creatures that we would see over and over again during our tour.

The qilin is said to appear with the imminent birth or death of a sage or illustrious ruler. “It has a single horn on its forehead, a yellow belly, a multi-coloured back, the hooves of a horse, the body of a deer, and the tail of an ox. Gentle of disposition, it never walks on verdant grass or eats living vegetation.”³

The xiezhi is an animal in Chinese mythology credited with the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and between virtue and evil. Thus it is used as a symbol of justice. While there are variations in its manifestation, “it is a mythical animal of composite form in Chinese legends, usually bearing the head of a dragon, the horn of a stag, the eye of a lion, the back of a tiger, the waist of a bear, the scale of a snake/fish, the tail of an ox, and the hoof of a horse.”⁴



The Marble Boat



Pavillion at the Summer Palace



The Sacred Way of the Ming Tombs



The xiezhi, symbol of justice



Statue of a general, Sacred Way of the Ming Tombs

We went on to visit a jade workshop and showroom. While the amazing display of jade sculptures and jewelry in all shades of colours and the phenomenal workmanship evident in some of the items on display were truly amazing, we did not buy anything. I was tempted by some pretty earrings but resisted. After all, I already have too much jewelry that I never have occasion to wear, yada, yada, yada!

We had lunch at a restaurant attached to the workshop. The food was fine, but a big bonus was to find Western-style toilets, with toilet paper to boot!

Using a bathroom in China was an experience in and of itself. The Chinese word for “bathroom” translates as “happy room,” and we soon discovered that some rooms were happier than others were! At each stop, our guide would give us the “happy room rating,” from one to five stars. We assumed the rating standards were based on cleanliness, but that was never really explained. While cleanliness and the availability of hand-washing facilities affected both genders, women faced a different set of problems because squatting-type toilets are the norm in most of China. In areas popular with tourists, there usually were one or two Western-style (i.e., sit-down) toilets. Occasionally, there would also be toilet paper, either in the cubicle or outside,



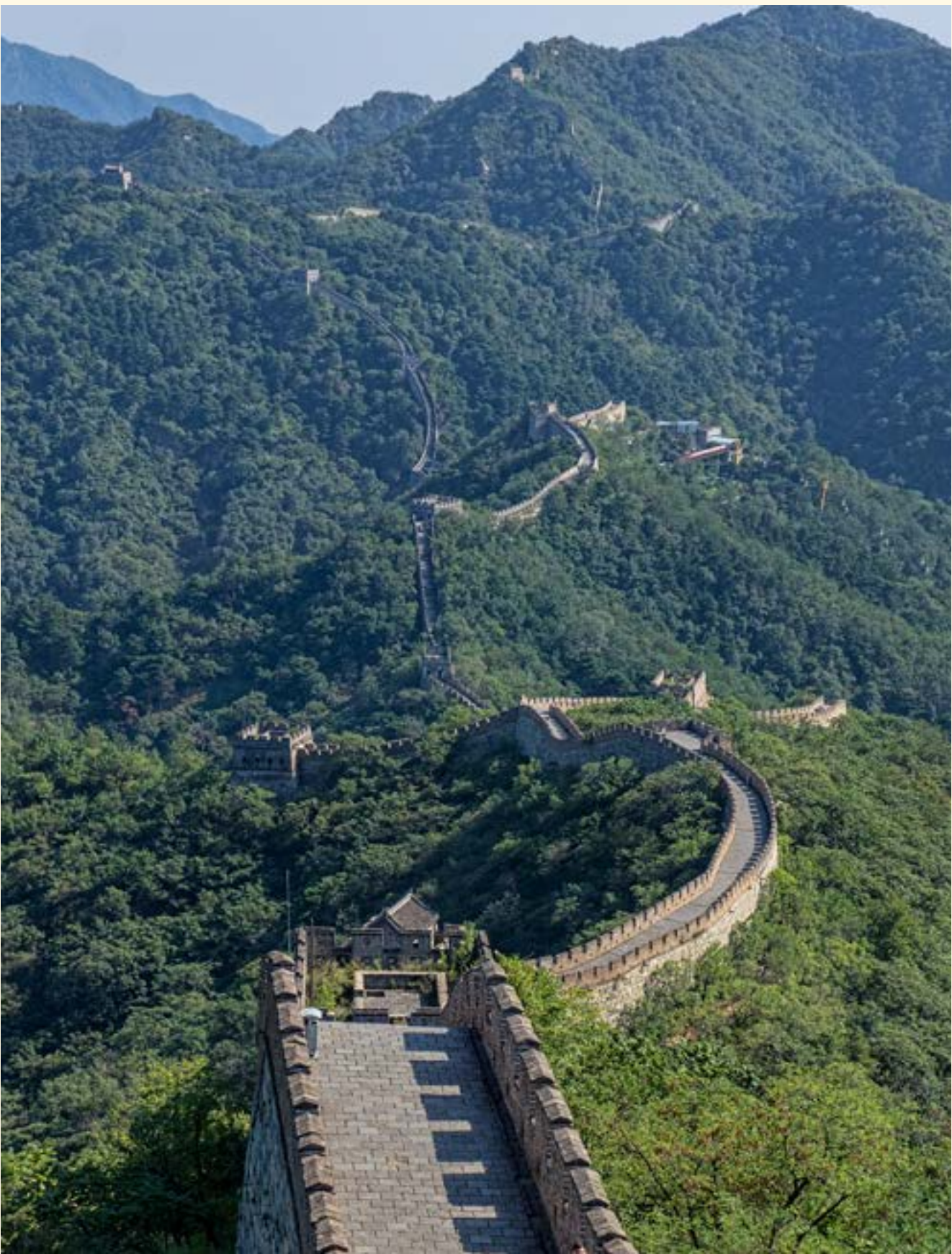
This bathroom zero star?

but most of the time, you had to supply your own. For most of the women in our group, it meant queuing up in front of the one or two Western-style cubicles available along with many other Western tourists who happened to be there at the time. The big event of the day was a visit to the Great Wall. After a 90-minute bus ride to the main parking lot, followed by a five-minute walk through a throng of aggressive street vendors peddling drinks, T-shirts, parasols, and other trinkets, we made it to yet another parking lot where we caught a shuttle bus that took us within walking distance of the gondola that finally took us to the Great Wall.



What an amazing sight! Built between the 3rd century BC and the 17th century AD, this 20,000 kilometer-long structure consists of walls, horse tracks, watch towers, and shelters. “The Great Wall of the Ming is, not only because of the ambitious character of the undertaking but also the perfection of its construction, an absolute masterpiece. The only work built by human hands on this planet that can be seen from the moon, the Wall constitutes, on the vast scale of a continent, a perfect example of architecture integrated into the landscape.”⁵

Fortunately, unlike most of the tourist attractions we were to visit during our stay, the portion of the Wall that we visited was remarkably empty of tourists. It may be because walking along the Great Wall is no easy matter. It is steep with narrow and sometimes slippery stone steps (without railings of course). A few of the more adventurous and fit among our group, Patrick included, walked quite a distance. I was content just to watch.



Above and p. 10: the Great Wall



DAY 3: BEIJING – XI'AN

Our first stop of the day was to the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. The Temple was built in the 15th century, renovated in the 18th century and, after being badly damaged in the early 1900s, it was finally open to the public as a park in 1918.

The temple was actually an altar where, “twice a year, the Emperor and all his retinue would move from the Forbidden city through Beijing to encamp within the complex, wearing special robes and abstaining from eating meat. No ordinary Chinese was allowed to view this procession or the following ceremony. In the temple complex the Emperor would personally pray to Heaven for good harvests. The highpoint of the ceremony at the winter solstice was performed by the Emperor on the Earthly Mount. The ceremony had to be perfectly completed; it was widely held that the smallest of mistakes would constitute a bad omen for the whole nation in the coming year.”⁶

The Temple of Heaven is surrounded by a large and extremely popular park, which is where we started our visit. As we walked in the park, we came across people engaged in various activities such as tai chi, dancing, ball playing, singing, or playing cards or mah-jong. Again and again, mostly in the morning and early evening, we would come across people exercising, playing, or socializing in parks and other public spaces. Often, people would smile, inviting us to join them. Tempting though it was, we were always on the go and too busy to stop. It was inspiring to see and made me wish we had the same custom here at home!

Continuing our journey toward the airport for our afternoon flight to Xi'an, we drove by the stunning IBM Dragon Tower and made a brief stop to look at the famous “Bird’s Nest,” constructed for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Then, we went on to a shopping centre for lunch . . . and my first Starbucks coffee since leaving home. Oh, how I enjoyed that latte.



The Temple of Heaven



Above: people of all ages enjoying the Temple of Heaven Park



The Bird's Nest building



IBM Dragon Tower

DAY 4: XI'AN

It's hard to find the words to describe a first impression upon entering the Museum of the Terracotta Warriors, our first stop of the day in Xi'an, and our main reason for visiting that city. “Amazing,” “astonishing,” “mind-boggling,”—nothing seems adequate to convey the feelings one has when first viewing the



army of life-size terracotta soldiers lined up four abreast, ready to protect their emperor in the afterlife.

The following, from a National Geographic article by John Roach, provides some background:⁷

“Workers digging a well outside the city of Xi’an, China, in 1974 struck upon one of the greatest archaeological discoveries in the world: a life-size clay soldier poised for battle.

The diggers notified Chinese authorities, who dispatched government archaeologists to the site.

They found not one, but thousands of clay soldiers, each with unique facial expressions and positioned according to rank. And though largely gray today, patches of paint hint at once brightly coloured clothes. Further excavations have revealed swords, arrow tips, and other weapons, many in pristine condition.

The soldiers are in trench-like, underground corridors. In some of the corridors, clay horses are aligned four abreast; behind them are wooden chariots.

The terracotta army, as it is known, is part of an elaborate mausoleum created to accompany the first emperor of China into the afterlife, according to archaeologists.

Ying Zheng took the throne in 246 B.C. at the age of 13.



Terracotta Warriors

By 221 B.C. he had unified a collection of warring kingdoms and took the name of Qin Shi Huang Di—the First Emperor of Qin.

During his rule, Qin standardized coins, weights, and measures; interlinked the states with canals and roads; and is credited for building the first version of the Great Wall.

According to writings of court historian Siam Qian during the following Han dynasty, Qin ordered the mausoleum’s construction shortly after taking the throne. More than 700,000 laborers worked on the project, which was halted in 209 B.C. amid uprisings a year after Qin’s death.

To date, four pits have been partially excavated. Three are filled with the terracotta soldiers, horse-drawn chariots, and weapons. The fourth pit is empty, a testament to the original unfinished construction.

Archaeologists estimate the pits may contain as many as 8,000 figures, but the total may never be known.”

After our visit, we bought a souvenir booklet and had it autographed on

the spot by one of the farmers who had made the initial discovery.



More Terracotta Warriors



Broken pieces of Terracotta Warriors, before being patched together



After a late lunch, we went on to see the Wild Goose Pagoda. One of China's best examples of a Tang-style pagoda (square rather than round), it was completed in AD 652 to house the Buddhist sutras brought back from India by the monk Xuan Zang.⁸ Buddhist monks still occupy the building today.

Later on the bus, our guide, Sunny, explained that Xi'an is more than 3,000 years old. It was the capital of the Chinese empire for 13 dynasties and is therefore said to be "the root of Chinese civilization." Today, it is also known as an important centre of culture and learning, with many well-known universities and institutes. But driving through the town, it seemed to me that not much of its previous glory remained, at least not seen from the area where our bus drove. I couldn't help compare Xi'an with Kyoto, which was also at the centre of its country's history for centuries, yet retains a great many historical buildings and monuments. But perhaps it's an unfair comparison, and Kyoto did not suffer through quite as many wars and disturbances as did Xi'an.

In the evening, we went to a dinner-theatre show. The dinner consisted of 20 or so different kinds of dumplings that neither Patrick nor I much liked. On the other hand, we both really enjoyed the show featuring the culture of the Tang Dynasty. Singing and dancing, solo artists playing ancient musical instruments, and stunning costumes and skilled choreography all combined to make the evening a thoroughly enjoyable experience.



Buddha statue in the Wild Goose Pagoda Garden



The Wild Goose Pagoda

DAY 5: CHENGDU

A very relaxed day, starting with a flight from Xi'an to Chengdu after breakfast.

During our trip, we took a total of seven internal flights. Most were with Air China, but some were with other Chinese airlines, including Southern China, Hong Kong Air, and a few others. With perhaps one exception, all the flights were surprisingly pleasant, reminiscent of flying in North America during "the good old days" when the planes were relatively new, you got a free meal or a snack on every flight, and you could actually cross your legs or move your arms without disrupting the passengers in front of or next to you. Definitely one up for China!



From the dinner-theatre "Tang Dynasty Show", Xi'an



Lesson on how to drink tea the Chinese way



Woman exercising at the Park of Riverview Pavillion



Paul getting a back massage at the Park of Riverview Pavillion

En route from the airport to our hotel in Chengdu, we stopped at the “Bamboo Park” for tea and a pleasant walk about. And then, a nice bonus: an entire hour-and-a-half rest before dinner, the first free time we’d had since our arrival in China.

In the evening, we went to dinner at a “Chinese Tapas” restaurant. Much of the food seemed rather odd. For example, there was a dish consisting of two eyeball-like things floating in liquid, with a most peculiar glutinous texture. Perhaps they really were eyeballs!

We spent a lovely evening at the Chengdu Opera House. This was a highly entertaining show with a variety of acts, including classic Chinese opera, musicians skilfully playing traditional instruments that are not often heard outside of China, and an amazing shadow-puppets performance. The show concluded with the famous “magical face changes” in which performers change their masks again and again, with a twist of the head or a wave of the arm, all in the blink of any eye. How they do this is supposed to be a closely guarded secret, although there are a number of Internet sites that claim to know how it’s done. The most credible explanation I found is that “modern day performers use full-face painted silk masks, which can be worn in layers of as many as twenty-four, peeling them off one after another. Skilled opera stars can change about 10 masks in 20 seconds.”⁹



At the Chengdu Opera House



Panda bear pigging out on bamboo shoots



DAY 6: CHENGDU – LHASA

The morning highlight was a visit to the Panda Breeding and Research Centre. I had imagined a zoo-like environment, but it was nothing like that. The 80 or so pandas currently living there shared about 600 acres of park land, divided into areas accommodating pandas in various stages of development: the babies in the “nursery,” the youngsters in “kindergarten,” and the adults in several large enclosures. We were told that pandas are basically lazy, with their favorite activities being sleeping and eating. It was quite amusing to watch the adult pandas munching on bamboo shoots; sitting on the ground, they’d pick up a shoot from the stack conveniently placed within paws’ reach, tear away the outside bark, and then proceed to munch away on the inside pulp. The discarded bark formed a heavy carpet on their tummies. They were clearly enjoying the food, and it seemed as though they might go on eating all day.



Black and red panda bears, Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding Center



Lhasa River, as seen on our drive from Lhasa airport to our hotel

We caught a 1 p.m. flight to Tibet, landing at about 3 p.m., and then proceeded to take the slow “scenic” road into Lhasa. As we boarded the bus, we noticed that a young police woman (smiling in a definitely non-threatening way) was seated in the front of the bus. We never found out why it was necessary to have a police escort on our bus; was she protecting us from street bandits or just making sure we did not stray from our itinerary? The latter, no doubt! If there was one constant during our two-day stay in Tibet, it was the police presence. They were not particularly menacing: no machine guns in view and no apparent stopping and searching of people, but still, you knew they were never far and that it was best to behave accordingly.



Tibetan woman



Buddha paintings on rock



Statues for sale at the Barkhor Market



The Jokhang Palace



Lhasa city centre, with view of the Potala Palace in the background



Colourful shop at the Barkhor Market



Yak butter anyone?



Grounds of the Sera Monastery



Pilgrims at the Jokhang Temple



Shop store fronts, Lhasa main street



Tibetan woman who kindly opened her home to our group for tea



Tibetan woman

Our local guide was a nice Tibetan man named Tenzin. He was incredibly knowledgeable about his country and its culture. He did tell us that we could ask him any questions about Tibet but not about politics.

On the way to our hotel, we stopped at a small village and took a short walk along the main road. There were a few people milling around; most just gave us a warm smile and continued on their way. We saw a small group of young children, maybe five to eight years old, coming home from school. They looked at us inquisitively, waving and smiling. I thought it would be lovely to get to know these villagers: they seemed so welcoming! But there was no time.

We arrived at our hotel in time for dinner. We had a light dinner, as we had been warned to eat a light meal to help our body acclimatize to the 12,000-foot altitude. I went to bed feeling fine and thought that this was probably because we had been taking altitude sickness prevention medication. Not so, as I was about to find out.



A pilgrim at the Jokhang Temple

DAY 7: LHASA

The next morning, I woke up feeling quite nauseated; I made my way to the restaurant for breakfast, but I had to turn right back. I barely made it to my room before I got sick. On the advice of our tour guide, I ordered an oxygen tank and tethered myself to my bed with it for the rest of the day. Bill and Tricia also stayed in.

The first activity of the day, a visit to the Potala Palace, was supposed to be one of the major highlights of our stay in Lhasa. The palace is accessed through a 670-step climb; sick or not, I had already decided I was not fit enough to do such a climb at this altitude. Patrick did make it all the way up but was rather disappointed once he got inside. It was extremely crowded, dark, and filled with the smell of incense and yak butter; plus, each group was allowed only one hour. It was difficult to really see anything, and photography was not allowed. From all reports, it would seem that the effort-to-value ratio of this visit just was not worth it.

DAY 8: LHASA

I did manage to join the group for the morning activity, which was a visit to the Jokhang Temple, the most sacred site in Tibet.

As we approached, we saw a great many pilgrims doing penance by prostrating themselves on the ground in front of the temple. They do this by bringing their hands together, then placing them on the crown of the head, then the throat, and then the heart. The actual prostration is performed by dropping the body forward and stretching it full length on the floor, arms outstretched in front. Then, after bringing the hands back together again and touching the top of the head, the pilgrims stretch their arms out once more and push themselves up, ready to perform the next prostration.¹⁰

Some pilgrims do this for hours at the time, not just in front of the Temple but on the streets leading to it.

“Jokhang Temple was founded in 647 by King Songtsen Gampo (who reigned from 617–649), the first ruler of a unified Tibet, and his two foreign wives who are credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet. The king’s first wife, Princess Bhrikuti (married in the 630s), was the sister of the Nepalese king, while his second wife, Princess



Wencheng (married 641), was the niece or daughter of the Chinese emperor. The temple was constructed to house a sacred image of the Buddha, the Jowo Rinpoche, which Queen Wencheng brought with her from China as a dowry. This statue is still enshrined within the temple and is the holiest object in Tibet.”¹¹

The interior was dark and thick with incense and yak butter. It was so crowded that moving was extremely difficult. It felt suffocating, and after about 10 minutes, I decided to go and wait outside in the courtyard.

Before meeting for lunch, we had about 45 minutes free time to walk about the markets located near the Jokhang Temple. It was a warren of narrow alleys filled with colourful shops selling everything from tourist trinkets to food to fabrics. It would have been so easy to get lost, but our navigator, Mary, took us back safely.

After lunch at the Lhasa Kitchen restaurant, I decided I needed to get back to my oxygen tank and so missed the two afternoon activities, the Sera Monastery and a visit with a Tibetan family.



Above and p. 32: people seen in Lhasa, near the Jokhang Temple



Bridge over the Yangtze River at Fengdu



Boarding the MV Victoria Anna

DAY 9: CHONGQING TO FENGDU

We left Lhasa in the morning and flew to Chongqing where we were supposed to board the Victoria Anna for a three-day cruise on the Yangtze River. Unfortunately, because of floods in the area, the ship had been unable to make it to Chongqing but had had to dock at Fengdu, 200 km away. So we had little time in Chongqing—just an early dinner at 4:30 and then a three-hour bus ride to Fengdu. It was almost 9:30 when we finally boarded our ship. Another exhausting day.

DAY 10-11-12: YANGTZE RIVER CRUISE AND YICHANG

Now that we were back at sea level, the altitude sickness was no longer an issue; instead, I found I had some kind of intestinal bug that forced me to stay on the ship that first day; as such, I missed the visit to the City of Ghosts.

“The city consists of buildings, structures, dioramas, and statues that are related to Diyu, the concept of the underworld and hell in Chinese mythology and Buddhism. After the building of the Three Gorges Dam and the rising of the water level of the river it became separated from the city of Fengdu, which was rebuilt higher up the mountainside on the south side of the river.”¹² The City of Ghosts is now an island.

A visitor approaching the City of Ghosts must pass between two guards who will decide of the visitor's fate, depending on whether the person has lived a good or a bad life. Various scenes depict how evil people will be punished in the afterlife.



Above and p. 39: scenes from the City of Ghosts



Up on the hill above Fengdu, the Ghost King statue, biggest sculpture ever carved on rock (415 feet high)

On the first evening, the ship's staff put on a colourful show featuring "Costumes through the Dynasties." It was very well done, except for the music that was way too loud, making it impossible to hear the explanatory comments about what we were seeing.

The next morning, we woke up to heavy rain. Until then, the weather had been really nice. Our days in Beijing had been on the warm side, but uncharacteristically sunny and smog free. And it remained that way for most of our stay. People kept telling us how lucky we were.

After lunch, a few of us attended the lecture about the Yangtze River that was given by one of our local guides. The 6300-km-long river flows from the Tibetan plateau and discharges in the East China Sea at Shanghai. The Chinese name for the river is Chang Jiang, meaning the "Long River." The name "Yangtze" originally only referred to the lower reaches of the river, near Shanghai. However, because this was the name first heard by missionaries and traders, it has been applied in English to the entire river.

Every time I left my cabin to go to a meal a couple of levels above, I found myself glancing at the jewelry that was for sale at a kiosk by the staircase. I still did not need jewelry and still had no occasion to wear it, yada, yada, yada, but I was weak . . . and on impulse one day after lunch, I stopped by and was easily persuaded to buy a cultivated pearl necklace and a pendant, each with a "free" pair of matching earrings.

An afternoon excursion took us along a tributary of the Yangtze known as the Goddess Peak Stream. We went out into a

small peapod boat where we were joined by our local guide, an incredibly cute young woman from one of the minority groups living in the area, who made up with charm what she lacked in English skills. In between commentaries and a couple of folk songs, she let us know that her goal was to find a rich American husband (not Canadian or European—she was quite clear on that point) and move to America. She was excited to hear that two of our fellow travelers, Bill and Judi, lived in Los Angeles.

Mickey

Unfortunately, they were unable to procure a rich husband for her, although I am sure they would have done so if it had been at all possible!



Above and p. 42: scenes along the Goddess Peak Stream



From the "Costumes through the Dynasties" show, by the MV Victoria Anna staff

It was a very pleasant and relaxing outing, even though it was raining a bit.

Our last excursion, before leaving the Victoria Anna the following morning, was to the Three Gorges dam, a 40-minute bus ride from where we were docked. Even for someone who knows nothing about dams and engineering, it appeared to be a remarkable achievement. The local guide was eager to share with us all the impressive facts and figures associated with the dam: It is 2,335 m (7,661 ft.) long and 185 metres (607 ft.) above sea level at its top; it is the world's largest hydroelectric power station with 34 generators that have a total capacity of 22,500 megawatts. We were told of the many benefits resulting from building the dam, including flood control and improved navigation; we were also told of 1.2 million people who were displaced and the 1,000 or so towns and villages that were flooded during the construction. There was no mention of the many other problems caused by the project, such as landslides, increased seismic activities, pollution, and the generally negative effects on wildlife and people.¹³

But it did make me think. Currently, nearly 70 percent of China's energy consumption is derived from coal. As a result, China is "the world's leading energy-related CO₂ emitter, releasing 8,715 million metric tons of CO₂ in 2011."¹⁴ Clearly, there is a need to reduce energy dependency on coal. So if not hydro-electricity, then what?

And then there's food production. Again and again, we heard about how much this or that town had grown over the last 20 years, how this former farmland had been covered over by new buildings, and how the average age of farmers today is 57 years old. This all begs the question: how is China going to feed its people in the future?



The Three Gorges Dam

After our visit to the dam, we drove back to the ship, were given about 20 minutes to gobble up our lunch, and then it was back to the bus for a one-hour ride to our next stop. According to our original itinerary, our ship should have passed through the Three Gorges dam ship locks and disembarked us at Yichang, but again because of the floods, the ship had to dock before reaching the dam, and we had to use a bus to get us to our next destination.



The River Park Pagoda

Between our arrival in Yichang and our evening flight to Shanghai, we had a whole afternoon to see a little of this pretty “small town” of over four million people. Flora, our lovely local guide, was obviously quite proud of her town and shared with us its history and its culture, often personalizing her presentation with tidbits about herself or her family. We had a relaxing walk at the River Park, went to a local museum where many of the artefacts uncovered during the building of the Three Gorges dam were being kept, and finally went for tea at a local tea shop. The shop owner was a bit surprised to see us because this shop does



Bride getting ready for photo, Yichang

not normally see many tourists. For our part, we felt privileged to be there, especially after we were told the other China Spree group that was following the same itinerary as we were had been taken to a Wal-Mart!



A lesson in tea appreciation



Yichang street

DAY 13: SHANGHAI

We arrived at our hotel, a brand new Marriot, quite late at night. Consensus was that this was the best hotel so far.

I was sick again, this time with a sinus cold that caused me to cough non-stop and left me feeling exhausted. I stayed at the hotel which, I had to admit, if you must be sick, was a good place for it. Patrick took in the morning activities (a walk along the Bund and a photo op from the top of the 88-floor Jinmao Tower to admire the view over Shanghai), went to what he said was “the best lunch of the whole trip,” and then came back to the hotel, giving a miss to the two museums on the afternoon agenda.

In the evening, we were treated to a fascinating acrobatic show, ERA or the Intersection of Time, at the Shanghai Circus World, just a few minutes from our hotel. “As a multimillion-dollar stunning acrobatic extravaganza, the first of its kind in China, ERA is a multimedia odyssey whose inspiration is a direct result of the combination of traditional Chinese acrobatic arts and modern technology.



Highest building in Shanghai



Shanghai skyline



The Bund, Shanghai



Looking down from the 88th floor of the Jinmao Tower, Shanghai

Just like Shanghai , ERA evolves through a constant collision between the past and future.”¹⁵ The whole show was pretty remarkable, but the finale was particularly amazing, with motorcycles entering a steel sphere one after the other until there were seven of them, driving and whirling around sideways and upside down at breakneck speed, crossing each other with perfect synchronization.

Day 14: Suzhou and Tongli

About an hour and a half from Shanghai, Suzhou is renowned for its traditional Chinese gardens, for its canals, and for its silk production. We started with a visit to the Number One Silk Factory. “The number does not really mean anything—it could just as well have been named Number Five Factory,” said Sunny. It was an enormous complex, with a small part dedicated to educating visitors about silk production and a huge part dedicated to selling silk products of every description—from exquisite bedding to fashionable clothing to tacky trinkets. The staff seemed particularly eager to sell silk-filled quilts and quilt covers. I had seen those demonstrated at my local Costco a few months earlier and had been tempted but had felt they were too expensive. These were most reasonable, so I decided to buy both a quilt and a cover. Although it was a pain to carry it for the rest of the trip and all the way home, it turned out to be an excellent buy, and I have not regretted it.

We spent quite a lot of time at the Silk Factory, and it must have been a bit of a bummer for the non-shoppers in our group, but they were good sports, and no one complained or, if they did, it was not loud enough so we’d hear.

I made the next event, even though I was still coughing non-stop, and enjoyed that hour-long visit to a classical Chinese garden known as the Garden of the Masters of Fishing Nets. Then, after lunch, I sat on the bus, exhausted from coughing, while the rest of the group went for a short visit to Tongli, which our tour book describes as a “unique water village, complete with canals, arched stoned bridges, cobbled lanes and tiled-roof wooden houses.”



Silk production, Number One Silk Factory, Suzhou



Garden of the Master of Fishing Nets, Suzhou



Garden of the Master of Fishing Nets, Suzhou



Above and p. 57: Scenes from Tongli, the “Water Village”

Day 15: Shanghai to Guilin

While we were enjoying our tour, a typhoon was developing in the area and, by mid-afternoon the next day, when we were due to travel from Shanghai to Guilin, our Air China flight had been cancelled. We sat at the airport for most of the day while Sunny frantically ran from one terminal to another, trying to rebook us on another flight. Eventually, after he had threatened to have “angry American and Canadian tourists surround the ticket counter, jumping up and down,” we were given seats on one of the last flights that left Shanghai that evening. Way to go, Sunny!



High speed train approaching the Shanghai Station



Going to the Shanghai airport on the high speed train



Sunny

Day 16: Long Sheng

Long Sheng, about an hour-and-a-half bus ride from Guilin, is the site of the famous Dragon Spine Rice Terraces. We were given a lunch box to take with us. “The



Patrick, Long Sheng

restaurants in the area are not very well developed yet,” said Chanel, our local guide. A bit of an understatement as it turned out. As we were walking past a restaurant, Trisha noticed someone washing dishes in a basin outside the front

door in what seemed to be cold water. “How well would our delicate Western stomachs have coped with the food served at that particular restaurant?” I wondered.

The outing had been introduced as “a hike up the mountain.” In reality, it turned out to be a gentle 20-minute walk up a gravel path. We had our picnic sitting on a wooden

bench in a covered structure at the top of the hill. The weather was pleasant, and the scenery was indeed quite lovely. An all-around most pleasing outing.

The terraced rice fields “are built along the slope winding from the riverside up to the mountain top, between 600 m to 800 m above sea level. A coiling terrace line that starts from the mountain foot up to the mountain top divides the mountain into layers of water in spring, layers of green rice shoots in summer, layers of rice in fall, and layers of frost in winter. The terraced fields were mostly built about 650 years ago. Longji (Dragon’s Backbone) Terraced Rice Fields received their name because the rice terraces resemble a dragon’s scales, while the summit of the mountain range looks like the backbone of the dragon.”¹⁶

We ended the day with supper at the Left Bank Café. Five of us followed that with a relaxing foot massage at a reflexology spa across from our hotel.



Zhuang woman and child, Long Sheng



Above and p. 61: terraced rice fields at Long Sheng



Above: scenes from Long Sheng

DAY 17: CRUISE ON THE LI RIVER

A leisurely hour-and-a-half bus ride in the morning took us to a village where we embarked on a small river boat for a 52-mile cruise on the Li River. It was advertised as a “memorable cruise” with scenery “reminiscent of classical Chinese landscape.” Not sure about the “memorable” part . . . but the scenery was indeed evocative of landscape scenery one immediately associates with Chinese watercolours.

We had lunch on board. Limp vegetables, meats of dubious origin floating in brownish sauce, cold fried chicken and cold fries to go with it: we all agreed that the whole thing was disgusting and by far the worst meal we’d had since the beginning of our tour.

Five hours and dozens of pictures later, we disembarked at Yangshuo where we were given some shopping time. None of us were particularly inclined to shop, but the bus had not arrived yet. Time for some ice cream.

Later on that afternoon, at the airport for our 7 p.m. flight to Hong Kong, we officially left China and said good-bye to Sunny.

DAY 18 & 19: HONG KONG

Upon our arrival in Hong Kong, we were met by our new guide, Chas, and got to our hotel, the Marco Polo, after 10 p.m. A few of us decided to have supper at the hotel lounge, and that’s where we got our first taste of Hong Kong prices: a sandwich, a soup, a mini burger, one beer, and a soft drink came to about CA \$100.

Almost as soon as we arrived in Hong Kong, some subtle but real cultural and political differences became apparent. Even though the streets were just as crowded in Hong Kong, the traffic appeared more orderly and, unlike in China, pedestrians had rights: they could cross the street on a green light without fear of being run over! And, miraculously, Google became available, and the websites that were not accessible the day before were suddenly open. And no more CNN news blackout.

We had a very busy first day, starting with a visit to Victoria Peak, the highest point on Hong Kong Island. We rode up on the historic funicular Peak Tram, admired the spectacular views over the city (even though it was quite misty), had time for a much-missed Starbucks latte, and then returned by bus.



Tired man resting on a bench, near the Bird Market, Hong Kong





Hong Kong skyline, as seen from the Aberdeen Harbour

After our Victoria Peak outing, we made a brief stop at the Repulse Bay beach, spent some time shopping the famous Stanley Market, had dim sum at the Jumbo Floating Seafood Restaurant, and toured the Aberdeen Harbour in a sampan.

In the evening, we went to the Symphony of Lights show, a multimedia show that began in January 2004.

“Dubbed ‘A Symphony of Lights,’ this orchestrated light and laser show currently features 44 buildings on both sides of Victoria Harbor, though it began on the Kowloon side only. It is rumored that this extravagant show costs about HKD \$44 million each year to produce. The show features several different kinds of lights including not only simple lighting from inside the buildings but also LEDs,

lasers, searchlights, and projection lighting.”¹⁷ But the show did not live up to its hype. For the first half of it, there was so little happening that I kept thinking it had not yet started... and then I realized that what I saw is all I would get! We were definitely underwhelmed.

Our last day allowed us to explore the city on our own. On Mary’s advice, we went, by subway, to the Bird Market. We had hoped to see local bird owners taking their pets for their daily outing, something Mary had witnessed during



Fountains, Jumbo Floating Restaurant



The Bird Market



The Fish Market



The Flower Market



The historic funicular Peak Tram, Hong Kong



The Bird Market

a previous stay in Hong Kong 10 years earlier. She described this as a place where locals would bring their caged birds to a local park, hang them on tree branches, and sit for coffee or chat with other bird aficionados while said birds sang to each other. Unfortunately, either the custom had died down, or we were there at the wrong time, but we could not find either the pet owners or the birds enjoying their outing.

From there, we toured the delightful Goldfish Market and the colourful Flower Market and ended our walk at the Ladies Market, described as a great shopping place with lots of choices and really good prices but, in reality, a place to buy cheap junk!

We got back to our hotel quite tired but happy to have spent our last day exploring a charming corner of the city we would not otherwise have seen.

We finished the tour in style, with a French dinner at the grand old Peninsula Hotel with Pauline and John. After three weeks of Chinese food, a French meal was just what was wanted!

Our Air China flight home the next day, from Hong Kong to Vancouver via Beijing, was pleasant and uneventful, even though it added up to more than 20 hours door to door.

REFLECTIONS

We've been home for almost a month now. Even though I missed quite a few outings due to being out of sorts, I feel the tour was definitely a success. We learned a great deal about China, its history, and its culture. More importantly, it opened our eyes about the complexity of the issues that China's fast-growing economy is creating for the Chinese people. It's not just about freedom and democracy, although that's clearly an issue, but it's also about feeding well over a billion people and bringing wealth and comfort to them. Nothing simple about that.



Hong Kong by night

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