

My China Trip (12th September-26th September)

It was a 2.30 am China Eastern Airline flight that we boarded for Beijing on 12th September 2011. This flight takes a little longer as it touches Shanghai first, which means an extra four hours of travel. The China Eastern Economy is almost like a low cost airline, except you do not have to buy food. It is like most economy class travel, except that they serve only beer and wine (the latter of which is horrible). No strong liquor. As far as punctuality I must commend them that at 2.30 the plane actually started to move. The stop at Shanghai was just enough to change planes from international to domestic.

At Beijing we were met outside by a young man who did not know English. He took us down one lift first then up again and out of the terminal building to the parking lot and finally found his car! And then he wanted to know the name of the hotel! So it was about 2 hours later that we checked in at Mercure Hotel. No complaints about the hotel as such, though we were to discover later that it was not center of town but way out! We had about 4 hours before we were to be picked up for the Beijing Acrobatic Show at Chao Yang Theatre.

The show was absolutely fascinating. We were early so bought a can of beer and chips to eat while we waited. The show started dot on time and lasted for an hour. This show is a must see. It is so good that we enjoyed it in spite of our eyes shutting from lack of sleep. By the time we reached back, most of the restaurants of the hotel were shut or shutting ---they shut by 9.30 latest. So we ended up ordering from room service, which turned out to be some excellent stir fried beef---stir fried with some onions and capsicums, and a plate of greens. Needless to say we were ready to crash after that, but only after setting the alarm, as we were to be picked up at 7am! It turned out that we were to be the first ones to be picked up as we were the farthest.

13th September: Naturally we did not sleep well enough and ended up being late for the pick up, as we had little time for breakfast. The guide was not shy of ticking us off for that (rightly so!). The group in our tour consisted of an English couple, one huge American and a thinly built Australian. All rather pleasant people.



The first stop was Tiananmen Square which Wendy (the guide) took us too. Most guides have flags, but she used her umbrella as a marker for us to follow. Believe me, that marker is needed as there are always hordes and hordes of people every where, what with tourists and Chinese themselves out sight seeing! We discovered China is a slightly lesser version of Russia where distances are concerned. From entering a place to reaching the main point is always a long distance. So you need to have your legs and feet in good shape, or you would need a wheel chair! Sometimes I felt so tired I actually wished I had a wheel chair!

Tianamen Square

The Square had The Peoples Hall, Mao's Mausoleum, The Gate of the Forbidden City, The Peoples Monument, etc. all around it. So you take a round of it and then enter the Forbidden City.

The **Forbidden City** was the Chinese Imperial Palace from the Ming Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty. It is located in the middle of Beijing, China, and now houses the **Palace Museum**. For almost 500 years, it served as the home of emperors and their households, as well as the ceremonial and political center of Chinese government.



The Forbidden City

What we saw was 4 different halls at different levels. All pagoda shaped, but used for different purposes. The emperor met different people in different halls, common man, officers and ministers, family and mistress. In fact Wendy told us how lowly the workers were treated. Hearing this reminded me a bit of the Shudras of old times. The story of the Dragon Lady was that she was his mistress and gave birth to a son, which the empress could not. She got the name Dragon because dragon symbolizes Power in China. Thus the Dragon Lady became all powerful and had more clout than the original empress! At each

monument there was so much about the emperor's superiority and so also the Dragon Lady's that one got fed up of hearing about it!

The next stop was a Pharmacy (totally unexpected). This was a government Centre of Medicine where they promoted Chinese medicine. I have to admit their way of doing it is unique. You go into a hall and get a short lecture on how Chinese medicine believes in avoiding getting sick, while modern medicine treats the ailment after it happens. Soon after that, the doors open and in walk 4-5 pairs of people---a doctor and an interpreter. Whosoever desires can consult the doctor for free. He feels your pulse and tells you what your ailments are. Then he has a pamphlet of a list of medicines (also telling you what plants they are composed of). On the pamphlet he marks what he thinks you should take and gives it to you in case you want to purchase them from the store below. So even though we were upset that they had added something to what was already a very full programme, it was an interesting experience.

After that there was a stop for lunch at a small restaurant. The food was pretty varied and tasty. No complaints on that front. They give you a variety which introduces you to the Chinese menu of sorts. They start with a drink (a glass of beer included) and tea. Then you have the dishes that keep coming---shredded beef, sweet sour chicken, 3 different kinds of stir fried vegetables, spring rolls, dim sum, soup, noodle soup, fried rice stuffed fried pancake and water melon or a fruit for dessert! Each group sits on a round table with a lazy Susan in the center.

Each such tour includes a Pearl, Silk or Jade Factory and sometimes Pottery. This is a must as the agency gets a cut from whatever sales are made. So our first factory visit was the Pearl Factory. As soon as you go, there is a hostess waiting to catch a group. She introduces herself and takes over from the guide. She first gives you a ten minute lecture on the difference of Fresh water pearls and Sea water pearls. An oyster is opened in front of you to see how the pearls lie embedded in it (of course of the fresh water, as the sea water has only one pearl in an oyster, which makes it very expensive). From there you see through a show case the workers working at the pearls before you enter the show room for the kill!

We still had two more stops---the Summer Palace and the Temple of Heaven. The former is beside a Lake, a palace which as the name suggests, was used in summer by the emperors. You can even take a little boat ride, or walk the round of the lake. Most of us took the boat one way for about 20 yuan each. The structures of their monuments are pretty similar to each other. Throngs of people everywhere get you tired just looking and walking while keeping an eye on the umbrella, so you do not lose your group.



The Temple of Heaven is the most holy imperial temple in Beijing. For this is where the Emperor came every winter solstice to worship heaven and to solemnly pray for a good harvest. Since his rule was legitimized by a mandate from heaven, a bad harvest could be interpreted as his fall from heaven's favour and threaten the stability of his reign. So it was not without a measure of self-interest that the Emperor fervently prayed for a very good crop.

The Temple of Heaven

I am sure reading about how much we took in in a day must be exhausting you! We were really exhausted and did not want to be in the bus and be the last ones to be dropped. It meant driving through peak hour traffic. So we got off at the nearest metro station and made our way home. We read about a food street right next to the hotel so ventured out. The so called street was very seedy. So we decided to try out the hotel's Chinese restaurant. Very disappointing food, we should have ordered room service again!

14th September: Our second day in Beijing. We were picked up 10 minutes late (somebody else was the cause of it, ha ha!). This time we were a group of 10. 3 Bolivian youngsters (who had caused the delay), one lady from Brazil called Cladysi, a NRI couple from England, a Chinese couple from the US and us.

The first stop was the Ming Tombs en route to the Great Wall. To my mind this was a waste of time. There was nothing but a similar structure as the halls in the Forbidden City. The Jade factory was the next stop.

Again a little introduction to jade and a little exhibition hall before entering the massive showroom. I did end up contributing to the agency's commission in a small way here, before we went in for lunch (it was at the factory itself, so one wonders if it was on the house?).

The Badaling section of the Great wall was the next item on the agenda. Our guide this day was Patrick. He collected the money for the cable car. As usual there were huge crowds, but even then things move pretty fast and in an organized manner. Our wait to get into the Cable Car was not more than 15 minutes. The ride up is over pretty lush hills, and it sure is a nice feeling to be experiencing the approach to something one used to read about in school. When studying about it I never imagined that I would see it someday! Unfortunately it was not a clear day. Well that was fortunate too in a way, because climbing up the Hero Slope would have been difficult otherwise. The slope is called so, because it is so steep that you feel like a hero having conquered it! At times the gradient is so steep that you have to hold on to the railing and climb. After climbing all we had to the best part was sitting on the steps on the opposite side where there were fewer crowds and just watching the action. Sitting down was also taking the load off the feet, after all.



The Great Wall

Leaving the Great Wall the next stop was a Silk Factory. Silk quilts are a big thing in China too. The pattern here was the same: a little lesson on how silk is procured from the silk worm and made into various items before the showroom. This day we decided to get off near the Walking Street in Shanghai. It was so good to sit somewhere and have a cold glass of beer! A well deserved one. Walking street was a happening place flanked by up market shops. Did not have eats but had kiosks with cold drinks or beer. We had planned to have Peking Duck at a popular restaurant off the street. After some more walking to and fro we found the place--Quanjud Roast Duck Restaurant. This is one of the most famous in Beijing and also one of the oldest, having been established in 1864. This is quite an institution and had on display photographs of various dignitaries of the world who had patronized it. We were told the wait would be about 20 minutes. Seeing the long line we wondered, but as is always in China we were called in after 15 minutes. Somehow till there it was fine, but once we ordered they seemed to have forgotten about us. Everybody got their food and after 45 minutes when we asked things started moving. Some communication gap there I felt. I thoroughly enjoyed the duck.

15th September: Great luxury to wake up at ease this day! We had an evening train for which we needed to be back at the hotel by 6pm. So we could have breakfast at leisure (very important to me!). The rest of the day was free for us to do what we wanted to.

After consulting the lady at the counter, we decided to go to a mall called Sally tun--on reading it I realized it was Sanitun! Taking the subway had become pretty easy for us by now, but we decided to take a cab to avoid getting lost and save time. Cabs run here by the meter, but sometimes one needs to check if they have started the meter or not. So as long as you have your destination written in Chinese there is no language problem. In this case of course the hotel concierge told him where to go. In fact all the hotels have printed cards with provision of writing where you want to go and of course the hotel name is already there.

Sanitun Plaza was situated near the embassy area. Pretty much like most malls and had some restaurants on the ground floor, which had wayside tables extending outside too. We discovered a road which was bordering it which was the road with bars and restaurants. Had a chilled glass of beer and a wonton soup and chatted a bit with the waiter who knew a smattering of English. On wandering around we discovered that adjacent to the mall was the Fake Market, showcasing all brands like Polo, Gucci, etc. Coming out of there we decided to look for a cab, because as usual we had taken the optimum off our feet. We made our way by subway and got off at the wrong station to experiment taking a bus! We were totally lost. We had to take the help of a waiter in one restaurant to call our hotel and he is the one who determinedly helped us get a cab. As it happened the cab driver was rather uncouth--he kept getting calls and 'barked' into them rather than talked. He kept the radio on and switching channels. When you are really tired, everything seems exaggerated in its irritation. It was with great relief that we saw the hotel!

Our departure from Beijing was worse than our arrival. One of the few times we felt let down by the travel agent. Lee who was designated to take us to the station was there on dot. We were rather impressed as usual. On way to the railway station he told us as to how he would see us off at the platform and therefore would need to park his car. He found a place underground, and we all walked out through dark allies and had to haul up our bag over a staircase as this passage was dark and the escalator was not working too. I have to admit we were quite tired and distressed. The worse was still to come. Suddenly on reaching the top he said he could not come in and showed us the main entrance to fend for ourselves! That really threw us off gear. Looking for signs or looking for a porter is rather unnerving when you are not prepared for it. We struggled our way in with the bags trying in vain to ask for a porter. We were told later that porters are available at 5 Yuan a piece. This we discovered in the train where a girl helped us fix one to get out of the station. We could not read our seat numbers as it was all in Chinese. Asking is not easy too, as very few speak English. To top it all both were upper berths. We had to haul or big suitcases up! Two other men were on the lower berths. They watched amusedly for sometime before lending a hand. Then luck favored us and those two switched places with two youngsters who immediately switched seats with us and tried to help us in whatever way they could!

16th September: Arrived in Xian at 9am. Sarah from the agency was at the station to pick us up. So as soon as we got out, she was there with the driver to take over. She got us to Hotel Grand Noble (334 Dong Da Street, Xian 710001, Xian, China. Tel: 862987690000) and checked us in. It is a nice hotel and very central. We were on a main street which seemed like a shopping area. We were quite hungry by now, and almost decided on a Subway sandwich, when I remembered the Muslim Quarter. Since it did not seem far away, we decided to try it out. Of course nothing is not far in China. We walked along and under the Drum Tower before we got out of the right exit and found the area just a little beyond the Bell Tower. The Bell Tower and The Drum Tower located northwest of the Bell Tower are called the 'sister buildings' or 'morning bell and dark drum'. In ancient China, especially from the Yuan Dynasty, the drums were used to signal the running of time and on occasion were used as an alarm in emergency situations. Some people said the Drum tower announced morning hours and the Bell Tower announced hours after noon.

The Muslim Quarter (also called Islamic Street). As the starting point of the famous Silk Road, Xi'an attracted traders from West since 1st century BC. During the 8th century AD, Xi'an was the largest city in the world with over one million inhabitants, among which one third of them were foreigners. The ancestors of these Muslims dwelled in Xian with Han people harmoniously and built Great Mosque for worship simultaneously.

Muslim quarter is a fascinating area where you can find exotic food, interesting people (some of the residents are still look like their Arabian cousins) and great souvenir stalls. You can taste many authentic Islamic snacks, like beef or mutton Rou Jia Mo (Chinese Hamburger), northwestern style noodles, Yangrou Paomo and many other snacks. The restaurants and eateries here are serving their food in budget prices. The whole area looked to me like the equivalent of China Town in most places. There were shops having ingredients like dates, spices, dried fruit, baklava type of sweets, etc. We entered a dhaba type of restaurant, which had tempting looking rotis being cooked in a tandoor. It had a lot of kabobs on skewers and other lamb and beef and chicken displayed, as well as Chinese style of food. We waited a while to get a menu in English, and faced the language problem again. In any case the place looked a bit unhygienic and shabby so we left and ultimately found a Chinese Place. We had beef dim sums with soup (the stuffing was meat ball and soup. By the time you managed to eat it of course the soup spilled out!). The other thing we ordered was crispy fried prawns with fried bread (prawns were marinated and fried and then a whole lot of grated and deep fried bread mixed with fried chillies and garlic was mixed into it and heaped tog). The prawns were particularly good, but such a large helping that we could not finish it. We had a little problem asking for spoon and fork. There was a young Chinese lad serving us very enthusiastically, and when we offered him a tip, he refused with a smile.



Fortified with food in our stomach we walked around the 'happening' area and admired the flower beds set in attractive patterns. This is something you find a lot in China. They are really good with flowers and gardens. A Starbucks sign beckoned us and we succumbed to having some coffee.

We walked up to the South Gate of the Xian Wall, following directions from the tourist bureau and guess what? We reached in front of it, but it was a roundabout and we did not know how to cross over! After trying for a while we gave up and discovered we could go to another Gate on the side we were on. So we climbed the wall from the Wengcheng Gate. In approaching the Gate we discovered that the street we were walking on could be very alive at night, with little shops flanking one side and restaurants and bars the other side. Encircling the city center of Xian, the City Wall has 18 city gates, which are all open for tourists to ascend the wall. Visitors can ascend the City Wall from the nearest city gate according to your location. No matter which gate you choose, you can tour the whole circle of the wall if you like. It was rather interesting and peaceful. People were there in rickshaws and on bikes. We had not realized we could get these. I suppose they were available at the South Gate. The view of the city around was nice and one could walk as much as one wanted to. We thought we would walk up to the South Gate but got pretty tired so climbed down after strolling a bit. We got a cycle rickshaw to reach the hotel which was very close, with a cute little smiley old man was plying it.

The Tang Dynasty Theatre Restaurant that night was an interesting experience. The Theatre is huge. Except for about a quarter of it up front, the rest is laid out with dinner tables. The efficiency of the country is really mind boggling. The guide escorted us to our table where the theatre hostess took over. We were on a table of four, the other two being a Mother from Toronto and Daughter from Austria. The food was served course by course and had a fairly good variety. They served some rice wine and tea and one could order drinks from their bar. The show lasted an hour. It started as soon as the food was finished and the dessert was served. It moved pretty fast, showcasing cultural aspects of the Tang Dynasty and was extremely colorful and graceful. The timing was good, as one did not have the time to get tired of watching. In short it was a nice way to end the day.

17th September: Today we had the luxury of being picked up at 9.15 am! The tour was The Terracotta Army Museum and Banpo Village with Lunch. As I came out of the breakfast area, I noticed some staff lined up in two rows in the lobby as if to welcome somebody special. I decided to join the spectators most of whom were a large American group. I learnt from them that it was supposedly the former Taiwanese president they were waiting for!

The rain that started the previous night was still on. Fortunately the guide had suggested we borrow umbrellas from the hotel, which we did at a deposit of 100 Yuan. Our guide was Sally. This was the first tourist bus with a tray near the driver saying, 'Tip for Driver'. We had been told you do not tip in China but found it is fast changing. In fact Sally is the only one who suggested we tip in case we are happy with the driver and her.

We started with the Banpo ancient village ruins. This is an enclosed area with muddy formations of a village. They had ruins of big jars with lids and guess what those were? Apparently infants were 'buried' in them and kept in the house! Eerie, I thought! This was definitely an avoidable bit of the tour. After that they took us to a ceramic factory and of course it had a showroom attached, which was selling furniture as well. Utter waste of time. The rain continued relentlessly.



Next was a 45min drive to the Terracotta Army Museum. Lunch was in the Museum campus before going in. So the group of 17 set out for the Museum umbrellas open, in the rain. We first saw a film about the destruction, discovery and restoration of the warriors. The Terracotta Army was discovered in the spring of 1974 to the east of Xi'an in Shaanxi province by a group of farmers when they were digging water well around 1 mile (1.6 km) east of the Qin emperor's tomb mound. For centuries, there had been occasional reports of pieces of terracotta figures and fragments of the Qin necropolis — roofing tiles, bricks, and

The Terracotta Warriors

chunks of masonry — having been dug up in the area. This most recent discovery prompted Chinese archaeologists to investigate, and they unearthed the largest pottery figurine group ever found in China.

The custom was that when an emperor died all the emperors' soldiers and men were killed and buried with him. Emperor Qin Shi Huang was the first one to make Terracotta replicas so that these could be buried instead of killing the poor souls! Seeing the pit was quite a sight. The excellent work done in restoration is amazing! No wonder it is one of the Wonders of the World. You see 3 such pits before going on to see the bronze museum of the Chariot.

The **Qin bronze chariot** is a two-piece Qin dynasty bronze artifact. The first piece "bronze chariot one" consists of a driver with two seats in the chariot with a bronze umbrella. The second piece "bronze chariot two" is a separate carriage. Both are about 50% the size of a real horse. The chariot was unearthed in 1980 at the Qin Shi Huang mausoleum. It is one of 64 designated historical artifacts that can never leave Chinese soil. This was also found in many pieces and restored together.

From 1-4pm we were seeing the museum after which the return journey (rain continuing) started! It was a good one hour drive. We returned to the hotel by 6pm. Had dinner at the hotel Coffee Shop and retired early.

18th September: No leisure today! We checked out at 5.15 in the morning, to be picked up at 5.30am. Waiting for the pick up I saw the receptionist approach me with a very accusing look on her face, 'you have taken a laundry bag'! Yes I had. Then she told me to pay 40 Yuan or return the bag. Naturally I returned! I had packed a laundry bag as it was rather nice; not realizing it was not among the complimentary items!

At Guilin we were received by Vincent. He was a welcome change as he spoke good English but did not help with baggage. As you start from the airport the city is beautiful. Unfortunately though as you approach town there is a lot of ugly modern construction. The hedges are beautifully manicured with a combination of plants of different colors. A beautiful 'painting' with flowers of different colors and shapes.

We checked in at the Guilin Bravo Hotel by 1pm. Located by the river the Bravo is a comfortable 4 star but a little gaudy. We had a room on the 9th floor with a view of a bit of the River. No complaints about the hotel as such.

Guilin is built around plentiful rivers and lakes that are connected and linked together. The Li River and Taohua (Peach Blossom) River; Rong (banyan tree) Lake, Shan (Chinese fir) Lake, Gui (Osmanthus tree) Lake, and the Mulong (Wooden dragon) Lake comprise of Guilin's central round-the-city water system, known as "Two Rivers and Four Lakes Area". There are distinct marble bridges and pavilions throughout the waterways.

We organized a taxi for 300 Yuan for the day to take us to 4-5 places. The Reed Flute Cave, Solitary Peak, 7Star Park and two lakes. Before setting out we had to go to an ATM and try and book ourselves on a night cruise of Guilin. Unfortunately they had no English speaking cruises so we dropped the idea. I was quite disappointed.

We arrived at the caves and there was nothing in English. The driver helped us buy the tickets through sign language (even he did not know English). Reed Flute Cave is situated on the hillside of Bright Hill of Northwest Guilin and near the Peach Blossom River. It is 5 kilometers from the city center, making it a ten minute drive (half an hour by bike) from downtown. The cave gets its name from a reed growing near the entrance of the cave that is used to make flutes. It was absolutely breathtaking! The formations were amazing and spot lighted as we went along. There was a group with a guide, but all in Chinese. In such caves there is usually a suggestion of what the forms look like so one can enjoy it better. You have to move on with the group because the light goes



The Reed Flute Cave

off. One cannot capture these jewels on the ordinary camera. It astounds you as to what the movement of water through rocks and stone can do.

Out again and it was hot and we were hungry. On route to find something to eat the driver pointed to The

South Sea Pearl factory and we decided to go in. It was a feast to the eyes to see the collection of pearls. I did not really think I needed to buy. But guess what? I did end up buying some fresh water pearls after all! Of course hated to find out on my return that what I thought was a bargain well done (50% off), was still at least 3 times the price available here!!

Lunch was a fiasco. The driver took us to a place where again English was zero. The waitress kept mumbling which ended with something sounding like 'PO' and we wondered if she meant us to order. But she continued after we had ordered too, and when we mimed 'what?' she pointed to beer that somebody was having! We discovered later that beer in Chinese was 'Pshchio'. We had a huge plate (which we could not finish) of fried fish with Orange sauce which came after we had finished the noodles! The greens came even later and we had to leave them. While waiting for our order, I was just watching the stock of beer arriving at the restaurant. It must be a very popular place, as it was huge, and there were crates after crates arriving. It was right on a main street also.

Solitary Peak was next. Solitary Beauty Peak (Duxiu Feng) is located in downtown area of Guilin city. It provides a good view of the town below. It has been called the "pillar of the Southern Sky." In the haze of dawn or the glow of sunset the peak is purple or gold. A climb up the 306 stone steps to the top is rewarded by a panoramic view of the city. The view from here shows clearly the many limestone pinnacles that rise out of the flat land that surrounds them. Unfortunately we were in no position to climb those 309 steps, so it turned out to be a waste of time and money with a ticket of 80 Yuan each. I was ready to collapse at this point. So cutting off the rest it was decided to do the Seven Star Park and then call it a day.

Seven Star Park (Qi xing Gongyuan), is located on the eastern side of the Li River, 1 kilometer from the city center. This delightful park that has been landscaped to encompass hills and natural waterways is a great favorite with the local people and tourists alike. We decided to buy the lowest ticket which was for the park only and no other side attractions. This was for 50 Yuan each instead of 110 which included the caves. We were both pretty exhausted by then.

It felt so good to go to the hotel, have a bath and relax. It's surely nice to walk out of a hotel and reach the place you want to go to! We walked around the lake for a bit before sitting down for a drink. We chose The Liriver Cuisine for dinner. This was a restaurant on the Lake. After some struggle we ordered 2 vegetarian dishes, a cabbage stir fry and a pepper dish with buckwheat. Both had bits of meat in it, but were tasty. The dishes were so huge that we could not finish them. After dinner we sat at the water edge and had an ice cream each, admiring the lights.

When crossed the main bridge some singing had started. It seems like a usual practice in some parts of the Chinese cities, for people to put up their music systems and sing as if performing on stage. We wondered if they needed to take permission or something. We were being picked up at 8.30 am the following day, so needed to get a good night's rest.

19th September: We were picked up by Sunny at 8.30, after a chaotically crowded breakfast. The whole place was packed with no place to move. Sunny our guide for the day was a sweet girl but had a very bad accent! Moon Hill was 'moon (without n) and hill was 'here') Sounded like 'Moo here'! We were headed for the Li River Cruise to Yangshou.



Li River – A Mile-long Natural Gallery

It is just like a lush ribbon gracefully winding through Guilin. The 84-km long stretch between Guilin and Yangshuo is particularly spectacular. Li River is famous for its beautiful hills and waters, wonderful caves and rocks. The cruise was for 4.5 hours. On the boat we took the upper floor. Each floor had the buffet table laid out for lunchtime. As happens in a cruise most people were out on deck most of the time. The whole topography was extremely reminiscent of Ha Long Bay in Vietnam. The main difference was that this was a narrow strait surrounded with the

Li River Cruise

'hills' (conical limestone peaks) while in Vietnam it was the sea, so the water was a huge expanse!

The views one sees includes farmers and their water buffaloes work at the rice paddies. Fishermen glide on narrow bamboo rafts. Some of them have their working bird cormorant help catching fish. Duck herders watch over their flocks. Women do washing or cooking at the river bank. The Cormorant birds are a specific feature of this area. There were hawkers on bamboo rafts trying to sell their wares. Lunch was pretty much like the ones served during the other tours we had taken so far.

We reached Yangshou at 2 pm (again precision of time) from the wharf you walk straight into a walking market. We had more than 4 hours to kill as we had booked the Impression of Liu Sanjie show. This is an outdoor performance set in real mountains and rivers in Yangshuo County. The stage is a 2km (1.25 miles) stretch along Li River with 12 mountain peaks and the clear sky as the background. Unlike performances with traditional artificial stage, here you get a show with natural background. Sunny had chalked out a plan for us. We were to drive around to the Ethnic Community area and then take a bamboo boat ride. This was to be followed by a visit to the Moon Hill and then dinner before the show. For the extra bit she charged 200 Yuan each. Yangshou is like a hill station with lush green vegetation and Tangerine loaded trees. The usual thing to do is bike or hike or walk. It is worth spending a couple of days if you are fond of nature. Walking along the walking street which is called the West Rd, we thought it would be nice to come back there for dinner.



The drive through the hills to the part of the Dragon river for bamboo boating was very pretty. As a boat ride it would have been nice if crowds were less. There were lots of locals who were very boisterous. The boats moved very close to each other and were operated with poles dug into the river bed and pushed. There is some custom of renting huge water guns (pichkaris) and squirting water at each other. They haul the boat up one level of the river and slide you down and enjoy your scared expression. When they slide you down there is photographer who clicks a whole lot of pictures. By the time you get off the boat they have your file ready to

Bamboo Boat Ride

choose your pictures and within less than 10 minutes you get your ordered photos, laminated and all for 15 Yuan each! Talk about enterprise!

We drove down to the Moon Hill next. The path up was a very wooded and lovely path but high steps at times. Sunny with her small heels seemed to do it effortlessly. Two hawker women followed us right from the bottom. After half way up we started asking people coming down as to how much more we had to cover and the standard answer was '15 mins'. The last was an Indian couple who said it was only another 100 steps. So on and on till finally the top! But wait a minute, there was more to see on the other side, which meant more climbing. The view was breathtaking! It was a view of the village through cascading hills. Our camera battery gave up on us at this moment. A Korean girl offered to take our photo and email it to us! So she took a few. We went back to the walking street in the wharf area for dinner.

We were then heading for the Impression Show along with multitudes of people! Once again from the entrance to the seats must have been a 15 min walk. A stage was set on the water front with lime stone peaks (Karst).as the backdrop. I think the stadium seats 2000 people. It was packed with tourists. Rather unique as to how the show was done in water, with ramps rising out of the water as and when needed. The theme was the life style of the villagers and had a cast of 600 or so, picked from local people. I would say it was nice as a concept but not spectacular. On the drive back we slept on and off with the cackle of Sunny and the lady driver in the back ground. It was 10.30 pm by the time we reached the hotel.

20th September: The morning was luxuriously late as the airport pick up was at 11 am. The breakfast was enjoyable too as crowds had left. It was indeed a welcome change from the previous day. As usual Michael was dot on time. Michael was a very pleasant young man with a very understandable accent who came to see us off. He checked us in and saw us in till the security check.

And thus we arrived in Hangzhou. Getting out of the terminal I noticed a tiny elderly looking lady with a placard of our name. I waved to her and she came forward to meet up with us with a bright smile. That was Jane. She came in a car driven by another lady. Very efficiently she handed us each a map and booklet of tourist attractions in Hangzhou. Nobody had done that so far.

A core city of the Yangtze River Delta, Hangzhou's position on the Hangzhou Bay 180 kilometres (110 mi) southwest of Shanghai gives it economic power, and moreover, it has also been one of the most renowned and prosperous cities of China for much of the last 1,000 years, due in part to its beautiful natural scenery. The city's West Lake is its most well-known attraction.

Approaching this town from the plane one saw large expanses of verdant fields, presumably rice. There seemed like vast stretches without buildings. Drive out of the airport and you hit buildings right away—which were very reminiscent of the Bombay Cooperative society buildings. Of course as you went further in they became taller. Crossing a tunnel which is under the West Lake, we first entered an up market shopping area on Jiang Street after which we turned towards the Lake front-- that is where the beauty began! The rest of the way to Hotel Shangri-La we drove along side the Lake. The hotel was facing the lake, but the room was not high enough to get a clear view of the Lake. The hotel is nice, but had no lobby.

On way to the hotel Jane offered to come the next day, which was a free day at the charge of 100 Yuan for the whole day. Her accent being difficult and knowledge of English not very much, we muttered to ourselves in Hindi that we might have considered had she been good in both the spheres!

After checking in we went for a walk to the Lakeside. We decided to take a causeway called the Su Causeway which goes South to North (Sauce to Norse as Jane said!) on one side of the lake. A poet Su Shi (Dongpo), had the West Lake dredged, and built the Su Causeway by dredged silt. To commemorate Su Dongpo's achievements in controlling the West Lake, it is named as "Su Causeway". Since then it has ranked the top among the "Ten Views of the West Lake". Built above horizontal waves, the long Causeway links the South Mountain and the North Mountain, adding a charming landscape for the West Lake. The whole area was just so beautiful and peaceful. We walked the length of a park too, which branched off the causeway. On the way back we took the battery car. These cars go all around the park and charge point to point. The entire round costs 40 Yuan. I was tempted by the boiled corn that all the Chinese seem to eat with such relish. I thought it might be seasoned, but it was pretty bland without even so much as salt on it. Fortunately I was a bit hungry by then so I could go through it.

After a couple of drinks in the room, we went to the Impression show on the West Lake. The guide came to escort us there, but we discovered the seats were bad. Maybe they were special- inside a boat, but the view was limited. We told the guide we wanted to go out in the open. The guy seemed upset but reluctantly got us seats outside. This was nicer than the Yangshou one, but one of these is enough to see. By the end of the show we did not have the energy to go up to the center city for food so ended up eating at the hotel coffee shop. We ordered a pizza, which was pretty bad. At Shangri-La the food all looked very good, but did not taste good.

21st September: Next morning we realized we would need an interpreter so decided to call Jane after all. Breakfast at the hotel looked good- I happily took some hashed browns and grilled tomatoes but neither was tasty. I decided that here I would stick to breads and fruit only.

Jane was there before 9 waiting for us as we got out of breakfast hall. We sat her down and gave her a list of things to do depending on possibility. Little did we realize she would take it as her mission to see that we did all of it. Once she had planned it all she said 'let's go' and our whole day workout started! That woman is a bundle of energy! She walks so fast that we had to slow her down from time to time. We walked out of the hotel towards the lake and stopped at the Seal museum which had not yet opened. The area is so beautiful that one can just savor walking around it. The lake is surrounded on 3 sides by hills and one side by tall modern buildings. Flowers were in abundance at this time of the year and really added to the beauty of the whole area.

Hangzhou West Lake Temporary Imperial Palace of Qing Dynasty (Hangzhou Sun Yat-sen Park), was what we walked to next. It had tiny sections of quaintly laid out parks and you had people doing Taichi and groups of old people playing cards and yet another group of 3 ladies dancing to taped music (for exercise). All these activities are quite common sights in China.

We took a boat to Lesser Yinzhou Island: Three Pools Mirroring the Moon (Sri poles meeyering moo as Jane said). This is one of the man made islands. Here you can look over at Three Pools Mirroring the Moon which means three small pagodas in the water on the south side of the island; each has five holes that release shafts of candlelight on the night of the mid-autumn festival. The boat was a regular boat pretty packed with tourists. The ride was about 15 minutes one way. There were shops and an eating place on the island too.

Back to the mainland we took a bus for the Lingyin Temple. Jane had a bus card which she swiped for us too. The standard bus rate is 2 Yuan. The card holders just swipe the card which Jane did 3 times for all three of us. The buses were very comfortable and clean and the drive to the temple was through lush forest which turned into tea terraces as we got closer. A lot in China was spruced up for the Olympics in 2008.

Lingyin Temple is a Buddhist temple of the Chan sect located north-west of Hangzhou. The temple's name is commonly literally translated as **Temple of the Soul's Retreat**. It is one of the largest and



wealthiest Buddhist temples in China, and contains numerous pagodas and Buddhist grottoes.

The monastery is the largest of several temples in the Wulin Mountains, which also features a large number of grottos and religious rock carvings, the most famous of which is the **Feilai Feng** (translated literally "the peak that flew hither"). The monastery was founded by monk Hui Li, who came from India.

Laughing Buddha

The carved caves looked almost Indian and reminded me of the Ellora Caves (of course subject of both is quite different) but far more prettier and cleaner surroundings. The main one was of a laughing Buddha. The Lingyin temple had a huge statue of Buddha and some good ones of Sukhamani and a number of their guardians. There is The Hall of Five Hundred Arhats, which really impressed me. This was full of statues of His disciples. The statues are absolutely beautifully made in metal, looking very alive and each one with a different expression. One could have spent more time just looking at this work of art.

We took the cable car to the North Peak, which was next door to the temple. Even though it was hazy, it was nice to see the tea estates, the temple and of course a panoramic view of Hangzhou. We were pretty hungry and tired by now and would have loved to eat had there been something there. So we had to make do with a beer each!

After some more brisk walk we caught a cab to the Six Harmonies Pagoda. The Six Harmonies Pagoda is located on Yuelun Hill overlooking the Qiantang River, and south of West Lake and is one of the true masterpieces of ancient Chinese architectures. It is said that the reason for building this pagoda is to calm the tidal waters of the Qiantang River, and as a navigational aid. Needless to say we could not even think of climbing it. We loitered around the garden at the base and then headed for an eating place. We opted for dim sums. Little did we realize that Jane would take us to the other end of town. It was about 45 minutes later that we entered Zhiweiguan (on 83 Renhe Rd, tel: 87065871). Once again we were thankful we had Jane with us. In spite of the photographs we had to know what was inside the dim sums! So we had one lot of dim sums and one plate of noodles. It turned out that this is one of the highly recommended places for dim sums.

22nd September: Jane had told us the previous day that we might have to leave early for the station as it was 'Nursing Car Day'. I thought all cars of the agency had to go for servicing....turned out she meant

'Nothing Car Day'. Once a year the West Lake observed a 'No Cars Day', so only taxis could ply in the Lake area.

We had a comfortable breakfast and went walking on the Bai Causeway. It was rather pleasant in the morning and there were lots of people. Some were with families, some flying kites, some just walking. After some time we hopped on to the Battery car and took the whole round of the Lake. In my opinion that is a must. Only problem is the driver keeps announcing in Chinese. It is a great way to take the round of the lake in one go. Being a Sunday there were lots and lots of people---some were picnicking, some fishing, some walking, etc. The Chinese seem to be quite a happy lot when they are together. Of course when you hear them sometimes, it sounds like they are fighting with each other but the sudden outburst of laughter tells you they are having a good time!

Hangzhou Railway Station is huge. The Bullet train was well equipped for passengers with baggage too. The only problem came when they announced the arrival of the train. We did not realize there were two stations for Shanghai. We needed to ask a co-passenger as to where we had to get off.

Arriving at the Station we were in for another surprise. There was nobody on the platform and there were two exits! We waited a few minutes then followed the mainstream of passengers. Not finding anyone even outside the station, we went to check the other side but came back disappointed. There were a lot of private taxi drivers trying to urge us to come with them. We finally went to a cab stand and showed them the name of the hotel. Again there was no English! But the sensible person who was in charge of the stand told the driver to go to the nearest hotel and understand where we were headed. And that is how we reached The New World Shanghai Hotel.

The hotel was pretty central and the subway station was round the corner. We decided to take it to the Bund. At the station we realized there were ticket vending machines and all in Chinese. With some help we managed to buy our tickets to Nanxing Street East. From there we did not know which direction to go towards the bund. Tried to ask a few people but in vain, they just said 'no' to when we asked 'English?' Then we spotted a group of Indians, which turned out to be a group from Rajasthan. Unfortunately even though they had just been there, they were in a bus so could not guide us. That is when we spotted a hotel and on enquiring we realized we were walking in the wrong direction! So it took us a while to find our target.

The word "bund" means an embankment or an embanked quay. The word comes from the Hindi-Urdu word *band*, which has Persian origins and meant an embankment, or dam. The Shanghai Bund has dozens of historical buildings, lining the Huangpu River, that once housed numerous banks and trading houses from the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Italy, Russia, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as the consulates of Russia and Britain, a newspaper, the Shanghai Club and the Masonic Club. The Bund lies north of the old, walled city of Shanghai.



Shanghai on Bund

The Bund is obviously a very popular holiday spot. We joined the crowds and walking along the bund looked at the Pudong side of Shanghai. The skyline changed colours as the sun set. Cameras were going 'click click' all around. For dinner we walked back to Nanxing Street and off the street we found a Chinese restaurant, which had a waiting of about 15 minutes. The food was good. Unfortunately I do not remember the name. After dinner we took a cab and returned to the hotel.

23rd September: The second day in Shanghai we had booked a Shanghai City tour which was to last the whole day. We were picked up at 9 am and drove around to pick up others from their hotels. The group consisted of an American mother and her yoga teacher daughter. There was one gentleman who had just returned from the Everest base camp in Tibet. There was an NRI Australian, a Swiss couple, a Lebanese and an Egyptian girls and our guide was Roy.

Our first stop was the Yu'an garden. A garden said to be built by a son for his Father. Yuyuan Garden is located in the center of the Old is considered one of the most lavish and finest Chinese gardens in the region. The garden was created by Pan Yunduan, who spent almost 20 years building a garden to please his father Pan En, a high-ranking official in the Ming Dynasty, during his father's old age. It had interesting little sections, which included water bodies, bonsais, carvings etc.

After going around the garden Roy had organized a tea ceremony. There was this big tea hall with various tables. A hostess immediately took over. She escorted us to a table. There were about 20 bottles lined up with different teas. She brought a tray with a teapot and cups and proceeded to make us taste a variety of teas ---different flowers and herbs. There were some floral ones, wherein the flower was wrapped up in tea leaves. The hostess untied one of these and put it in a large cup and poured hot water over it .After 10 minutes or so the flower bloomed back to its original size. Looked very pretty! After the tasting they hope that you will buy something---tea, mugs, t-shirts, etc.

Our extensive tour took us next to the Shanghai museum, where all of us parted to meet after 45 minutes. We visited the weapon section, currency and pottery sections. The pottery section was the best. Lunch was organised at a hotel which seemed to specialize in tour lunches. I have to admit it was the first such lunch where all of us interacted with each other during lunch. The NRI from Sydney was a vegetarian so just had a couple of vegetables and fruit. When we were leaving Roy asked all of us if we had taken some chop sticks! One of the waiters was standing there looking for a pair that was missing. Of course no body had taken any, so we all left. Frankly I did not think a pair of plastic chop sticks missing should have called for an inquiry about it.

We had to go through a pearl factory visit once again and were a little restless by now. The Egyptian and Lebanese girls took a long time. The rest were sitting in the bus and we had to send word to them. I was looking forward to the last stop which was the French Quarter, the area called Xintiandi. This is a very quaint part of the city. There is a walking street, sections of which have restaurants on both sides and a section with shops on both sides. We decided to stay back and spend the evening at Xintiandi. The Americans whooped with excitement when they saw an ice cream chain called Cold Stone. Some of them had the ice cream and we sat around for some time. The group left soon after that and we said good bye to the group here.

We sought out a bar to sit in, and ordered our drinks at a restaurant called Jazz Cigar Wine, which had a happy hour on. After drinks we went around the area a bit deciding where to eat. That is when we found Simply Thai (at 27, Lane 181 Taicang Lu corner of Madang Lu & Xingye Lu, Phone: 63262088). Rather enjoyed the food and discovered later that it is one of the highly recommended places on the Lonely Planet. It was certainly teeming with people.

24th September: This was our second last day in China. We decided to do whatever shopping we needed to do as the following day we would have to check out by 12 noon and leave our bags.

The breakfast at The New World Shanghai was good and tasty and we did full justice to it. In fact the best out of all the hotels we stayed in. They all have a similar array, but there was taste in their food. We took a day pass for the Metro. We ventured to the Underground Market under the Nanxing Station. Of course we saw only part of it, as it is rather big. Next we strolled around this large shopping area of Nanxing Street East. We had lunch at a Noodle House which was rather disappointing.

Our next quest was to find the Quilts' place. This took us to the Shanghai Silk Museum, No.289 Aomen Road, Putuo District Shanghai 200000, China, 021-62660378. We took a cab to the hotel and had a coffee break, before getting out at 5 pm. We had not been to the Pudong side so that is where we went. Getting out of the metro station, we discovered an over head walkway connecting the various parts of the area. These had shops and restaurants too. We walked along the river front and discovered the Bund side was nicer. We went back to Xintiandi for dinner. After dinner we decided to try the ice cream that the Americans were going gaga over. Well we had a different opinion about it. What was interesting is that you pick a flavour and the accompaniments and the whole combination is mixed over a cold stone, which is at a freezing temperature, and then given to you. Thus the name Cold Stone.

25th September: I tried the Litchi at breakfast! All these days I had not realized it was litchi. It was quite tasteless! We checked out around 11 am leaving our bags with the concierge. We headed for Yue Gardens. It was a hot day and we did not really know where to go. We spent some time walking through the narrow streets around the Park. We were finding it difficult to decide where to eat. Finally we spotted what looked like a Chinese version of KFC, called Dipco. Their chicken was coated with tiny bits of spring roll wrappers instead of bread crumbs. We went over towards the wharf to get a boat ride. To reach the ticket counter took us half an hour of walking through empty halls! On reaching we discovered the tour was too long, so we decided not to take it. After walking around Nanxing Street we took a metro back. It was 5 pm by the time we reached the hotel and we were tired and exhausted. I ordered a coffee and Bijjan a beer and we sat in the lobby. There were still a couple of hours for the pick up so Bijjan decided to check out the Yongsan Park across the hotel. I was in no mood to walk some more. We had almost 2 hours to kill at the airport. We realized our co-passengers were a Rajasthani Group, a Gujerati and a Maharashtra Group with very few Chinese! We discovered that the flight was delayed and the Gate number had changed to one in the basement and the flight was delayed. And what is more the basement had no food outlets either and to go up to the main terminal you had to climb 3 flights of stairs as the escalator was only coming down! Talk about being confined! With some difficulty we managed to get some beer from the vending machine. The other passengers made a hue and cry and got the airlines to give some snacks and a cold drink. The answers the airline staff gave were so curt and rude that it was upsetting. Any way, ultimately it was an hour late. A pretty distasteful departure from China! As always it was a great feeling to be on home ground again.

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