

This adventure started out as many of ours did, with something in the mail. I had always been interested in going to China, but Sally had absolutely no interest. Now that I am alone, it seemed like a good time to go. I had a brochure from Vantage, but their trip was 21 days-more than I was allowed to take off from work. I then got a brochure from Odysseys Unlimited, offering a 14 day trip and staying in the same hotels as Vantage. I got on the internet and found the websites for all the hotels that we would be staying at, and they are first rate. I hope I can get some access to the Internet from their business centers.

The thing that really sold me was they featured small (12-24) person groups. After my last trip with 50 people, that sounded great! I just received the list of the 21 people on the tour, and found there are two ladies from Florida, who I would assume are traveling together. With my luck they are probably transplanted New Yorkers! I arrived at LAX, and it was fairly easy to locate my group-since we were going on China Eastern Airlines, we were among the only occidentals there. I found the 2 ladies, and they told me because of the hurricane in Florida, they had to drive from Miami across to Tampa to catch a flight to LAX.

The flight over was comfortable, as the plane was only 1/3 full, so people were sleeping in the center seats. I had just bought a set of BOSE QC noise canceling headphones, and they really did the trick. We arrived in Shanghai and had to transfer to another flight to get to Beijing. It was literally a Chinese Fire Drill, as we were not sure where to go. Finally an agent with a little sign directed us through immigration and to the gate for our flight to Beijing. The gate area was a zoo, and we were scheduled on the last flight to Beijing that night. The flight was fine, and after we collected our luggage we were met by our Tour Manager, Joy, and our local guide Peter.

Before we got on the bus, Joy suggested we visit the "Happy Room" as we had a long trip from the airport to the hotel. Throughout our entire trip, she would give us an advance rating of each "Happy Room" before we went in to it. They ranged from 6 stars at hotels to a zero star on the road one night.

We were directed to our bus, and got to our hotel around midnight Beijing time, which was 9AM LA time.

BEIJING

Because we got in so late, our tour director revised our schedule to visit the summer palace first. This former royal retreat is now a park attracting both visitors and the locals. There were the usual lions guarding the gates to protect against evil spirits.



Once inside, there were some very interesting sights-one was a man doing calligraphy on the walkways with a special long brush, and across the lake a bridge with 17 arches.



There was also a beautiful pagoda up on the hill, but unfortunately it was under renovation and covered with scaffolding. Another fascinating sight was a stone boat that was used for ceremonial purposes.



We then walked down a passageway called the “Long Corridor”. The reason it was called that was because it was long! It was about 2000 feet long, and the inside covered with intricate artwork. Even the ceilings were intricately done.



The next day we headed out to the Forbidden City, which was the seat of imperial power during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1388-1911). Foreigners were not allowed, under pain of death. After the revolution, it was opened to all, and is now a museum.



The movie “The Last Emperor” was shot here, but because of the bright lights and the damage the camera tracks left, it was decided that no more movies would be shot there. The palace was huge, covering many acres, and there were huge open areas where the people would gather to pay homage to the emperor.



From the Forbidden City, we walked through a tunnel and came up at the edge of Tiananmen Square, which was the scene of the pro-democracy demonstrations some years ago. It was put down with military force, and a number of people were killed. It was a reminder that even though we could go wherever we wanted, the thumb of the government was in the background. There is an honor guard around the Chinese flag, and at sunrise and sundown, many of the locals gather to watch the flag ceremony.



The following day we visited the People's Park and the Temple of Heaven. The park was fascinating—there were all kinds of activities going on—tai chi, ballroom dancing, working with ribbons, paddles, and feathered shuttlecocks. Some of the ladies in our group actually went out and danced with the elderly men, who were surprisingly good dancers. During the “Cultural Revolution” dancing was banned as being “decadent”



There were also both men and women doing rhythmic gymnastics with ribbons as well as ladies doing a sort of dance with fans. (Not the fan dances strippers did!)



We then went to the bell tower at the edge of the Hutong or Old Section. This was a section that they were trying to preserve, and the little houses were extremely expensive. We visited one that was 1800 square feet, including the courtyard and was worth half a million dollars! But, there were 3 families living in that space, and they only had on bathroom. People with money would buy them, retain the outer walls, and completely gut the insides.



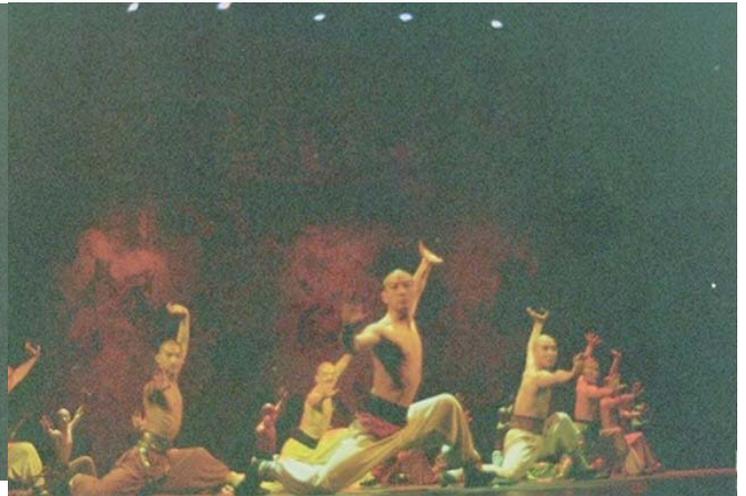
That afternoon was one of the real highlights of the trip—the Great Wall of China. To get to the wall required taking a cable car from the lower terminus up to the wall. The real challenge was getting past all the peddlers along the route to the lower terminus. There were literally a hundred or more tiny shops set up and each person would ask that you remember them on the way back down. They would cluster around selling whatever for “one dollar one dollar”, but if you tried to give them a US dollar bill, they would say no, they wanted 100 yuan note which was \$12.50, and the bargaining started from there.



The wall is some 2500 miles long and was built to keep out the barbarians from the North. It is the only man made object that can be seen from space.



On our last night in Beijing, I went to a Kung Fu show put on by Shaolin monks and apprentices. I remember watching the old Kung Fu series on TV with David Carradine, so I could appreciate some of the story. It was a story of a little boy leaving his mother, becoming a monk, being tempted by a female, and then turning back to the ways of his teaching. He finally becomes the head monk as his mentor dies and goes to his funeral pyre.



XIAN

We left the next day for a short flight to Xian, home of the Terra Cotta warriors. We explored the nine mile city walls and the moat. There was a shop there selling jade, and I bought a jade heart for my next door neighbor, who was expecting. The legend is that jade is supposed to bring you good luck, and coincidentally, her name was also Jade.

It was kind of hazy, but at the time we did not realize what the impact of the fog would have in store for us.



The next morning we visited the Wild Goose pagoda, which is 15 stories high and can be climbed. Of course, I HAD to do it . When I got to the top, I took a picture of the floor sign just to prove I did it. I learned that in Christchurch, New Zealand, where they wanted a dollar to certify you climbed the steeple. I told Sally, and she asked why I did not take a picture of the sign! Ever since then, I make it a practice to take a picture of a sign at the top.



After we visited the pagoda, there was a huge bell nearby that you could ring for luck. You had to pull back on a big log, hold it by both ropes, and hit the bell three times. One of the ladies tried it and I thought she was going to be launched!



We then had lunch at a restaurant specializing in dumplings before we headed out to one of the highlights of this trip. The Terra Cotta warriors made to guard the first emperor of China in his afterlife. There were 7,000 life size

soldiers plus many horses. Each warrior has an individually sculpted face, and they are arranged in formation in 3 separate vaults.

Some time after, the vaults were broken into during a revolt, and the wooden roof was burned and collapsed. The site was forgotten for hundreds of years until a farmer was digging a water well and came up with one of the heads. The site has been excavated and some of the warriors put in glass cases so people can see them up close. The pictures below need no explanation

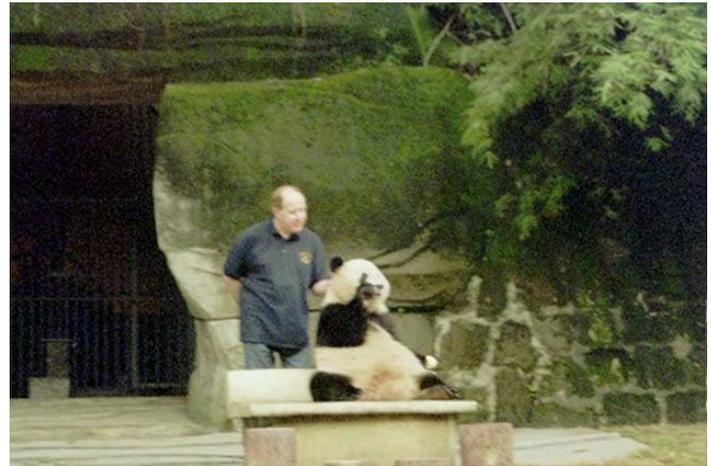
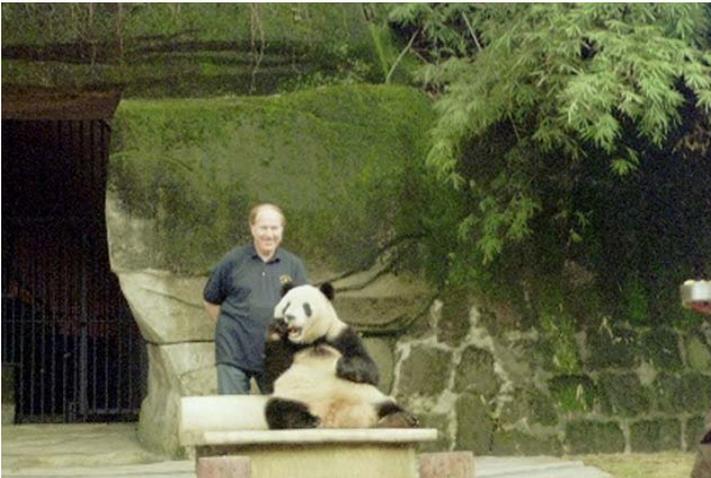


CHUNKING

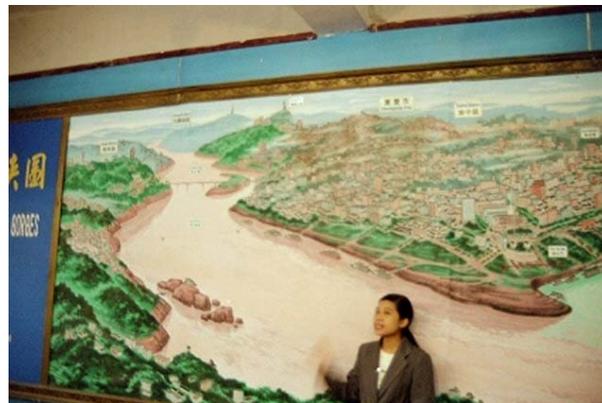
The next morning we flew to Chunking and had another highlight of this trip. We went to the zoo to see the pandas. There were 3 separate sections, one with two pandas, and the other two had one panda each in it.



They were really neat, and then the Tour Director told us that for 1200 yuan (\$12,50), we could have our picture taken with the panda. Well, you can figure who had the money out first. We were taken into the compound, and the panda sat on a bench and the keeper fed it apples, so it was happy!



We were then taken to Erling park, overlooking the city, that had a neat pagoda (no I did not climb it). The park also had a mural of the entire 3 gorges project and a lady came and narrated the story for us. I also took a picture of the city at night which turned out quite well.



We boarded the cruise ship there and it was really a problem for one of the ladies from Florida, who had bad knees. It was down about 50 or 60 stone steps from the street to the water. I had to help her and a little Chinese porter they call bum bum boys took her other side. We got her there, and all the time she is saying, "I can do it", which was sort of a watchword for us for the rest of the trip.

YANGTZE

We set sail down the river, and I got up on deck with my latest toy- a GPS receiver.. After I locked on to the satellites it gave me my position on a moving map, my heading and the speed of the ship!

Our first stops was at he Shibozhai Pagoda, which will have a dam built around it to protect it from the rising water when the dam is complete.

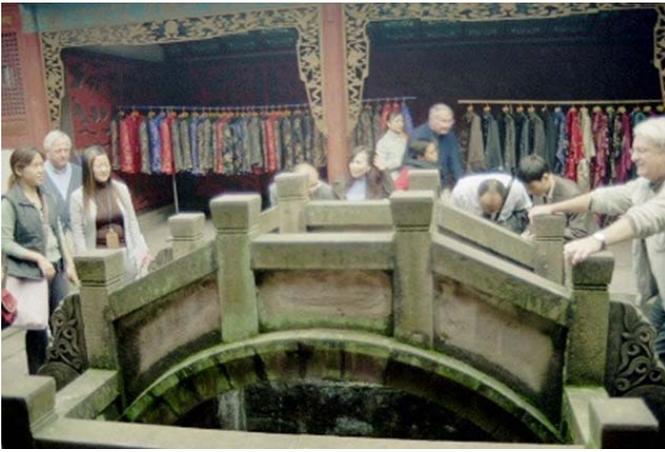
There are some 270 steps to the top, so some of the folks opted not to go up. The way it was built, there are separate ways up and down, so once you start up, it is very difficult to go back down the way you went up.



When we got to the top, there was a room with representations of various gods and goddesses that were quite beautiful.



Also at the top, there was a small bridge with a large salamander living below it. You have to try to cross the bridge in 3 steps to bring luck. I tried it, and was able to cross it in the required 3 steps. I also noticed that on the top of the pagoda, there were dragons on each corner to fight the evil spirits.



We continued down through the first of the Three Gorges until we got to the Daning River, which was one of the smaller Gorges. We were transferred to a smaller day cruiser to negotiate the shallower waters. We sailed by a house that had cultivated a series of terraces to grow crops on our way to the Dragon's Mouth Bridge, which was the entrance to the smaller gorge.



Unfortunately, it was very foggy, so I could not get any really good pictures. We wound our way up river with many twists and turns. There were people stationed on the shore as lifeguards in case someone fell in. And right in the middle of the gorge, a small hotel appeared! It was apparently there for people on another escorted tour.



We passed one spot, and saw monkeys climbing in the trees next to the water—on closer inspection, they apparently have food left for them down there—sort of like chum in fishing! We sailed further up river and came to a landing where there were sampans waiting for us. We had to transfer to them because the river got narrower and shallower.



We climbed into the sampans and were issued life jackets, and there were enough that we could sit on them instead of the bare wood. We headed further up stream, then turned around and headed back to the dock to get back on the larger boat.



On the way back we saw an interesting set of buildings, and we were told it is a mausoleum for the Chinese. We then sailed back under the Dragon's mouth bridge and reboarded our ship for the downriver trip



We sailed down river and entered the locks for the 3 Gorges dam. There was another ship in the lock with us and we were both moving forward at the same time! There was very little clearance between the two ships!



That evening, the ship put on a show featuring some of the crew in their native costumes.



The next day we docked below the dam and took a tour of it. It was so foggy again that it was impossible to get any decent pictures. We were taken to a museum that had a model of the dam and its surroundings. The place was laid out like a park with an interesting structure in the middle. The structure was basically an observation site to look at the dam, but it was so foggy it was useless.



We sailed further downriver through the old locks and debarked the ship in Yichang to catch a flight to Shanghai. When we got to the airport, it was socked in, and the flight we were going to catch was a turnaround flight from Shanghai. It was obvious that we were not leaving from that airport. It was at this point that Joy swung into action. She got on her cell phone, and when she was done, she had booked us on an early flight out the next morning from a city 4 hrs away and also booked us all into the Holiday Inn there. We had to drive to the city over Chinese roads that were not that great, all the time Joy was giving coffee to the bus driver to keep him awake! She was absolutely fantastic!

We caught an early flight out for Shanghai, and did some sightseeing before we checked into our hotel. We went to the peaceful Yu Yan gardens, a traditional Chinese garden whose plantings, courtyards, and pavilions create the illusion of mountains, caverns, and lakes.



Later that day, we visited the Children's Palace, which was a primary school. At that age the kids are still cute. There were quite a few classes going on, including music, calligraphy, painting, and dance.



Our last stop was at the Shanghai Museum. The rooms were divided according to subject. There were rooms of bronzes, ceramics, calligraphy, painting and furniture. There were also models of native clothing of some of the minority tribes.





We had our farewell dinner that night, and headed for the airport the next. At the airport something happened that really showed the inner working of the bureaucratic mind. As we checked in, there was a big sign in English and Chinese saying that for safety reasons, no alcohol was allowed in carryon bags. So I go through immigration and X-ray, and go out into the gate area.

Well in the gate area there are about 100 yards of shops selling everything including-you guessed it-alcohol! Armed with my trusty price list, I selected 2 bottles and put them in my backpack.. I also met 2 ladies that were buying scotch for their husbands and since the exact ones were not available, I told them which ones were similar, then turned to the saleslady and asked if I got a commission.

We got on the plane, and I asked Thelma to sit with me, which was nicer than having a stranger. After we were aloft, they came around with the drink cart. The only had wine and beer, so I asked for some wine. Well, they served it in a little plastic cup that held about 2 ounces if that! So, after the cart and cabin attendants passed by, I opened my backpack and poured Thelma and myself a real drink!

We arrived in Los Angeles, and my bag was one of the last ones off. I looked for the two ladies and did not see them, so I headed out to call for my ride. As I am waiting, one of them came by and said that Thelma was still there waiting for me! I did not know what to do, as you cannot go back in that area once you leave it. Just about that time my car showed up and I had to leave. I was really worried that Thelma might miss her plane, so I contacted her the next day and she said there was no problem.

I am now home for a while- other than 2 small west coast train trips. My next adventure is next year on the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Moscow to Vladivostok!

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