

Travel Diary of China Tour – 31-Aug to 17-Sep-18.

[See “Further Reflections” at the end]

Friday, 31-Aug-18, 11pm: Setting off on our China adventure!



Grey skies and some showery rain greets us in Honkers.



Saturday, 1-Sep: Despite steady rain and crowded footpaths and a sea of jostling umbrellas, we enjoyed our venture out to Flower Market Street (guess what they sell there!).





Quintessential Hong Kong!



The Peninsular Hotel is the Cross-Roads of Asia. We have twice met people we know having afternoon tea there! This time, we decided the queue was too long, so we took one of their courtesy Rollers outside back to our hotel (not!).



Riding the tram from one end of the Island to the other is another quintessentially Hong Kong thing to do!



Something I'd never done before on any of our other (several) trips to Hong Kong is ride the "mid-level escalators". So I did, and just beyond - where you hit virgin mountainside. A few were out of order (they are being upgraded). On the way back down, you take the stairs; I counted 1,300 steps.





Sunday, 2-Sep: Something else we did today was attend St Andrew's church in Kowloon. Have been there several times before, but not in their wonderful new auditorium. The old church now houses their Mandarin service (the photo inside the old church was taken well after the service ended, so almost empty).





Monday, September 3 at 1:29 PM, traveling to Guilin from Hong Kong International Airport: Now the adventure really starts!



Ah, Guilin! A taster in the form of a view from the plane of those strange mountains, and the Reed Flute Cave, and the Elephant Trunk Hill. More tomorrow!!





Tuesday, September 4: Today we took a cruise on the Li River, from Guilin to Yangshuo. I feel overwhelmed by beauty!!! How could I possibly choose only 3 or 4 from the 250 I took to show you!? (the 3rd one is the view on the 20Yuan note).





Tuesday night, 4-Sep, in Yangshuo (downstream from Guilin) we went to a marvellous show featuring local minority "ethnic" peoples (eg Yao, Miao) and relating their "stories". The show was designed by the guy who arranged the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony; it runs every night (sometimes 3x in one night) to capacity audiences (3,000 people at a time). 600 performers, culminating in 200 Miao women on stage at once (the stage is mostly water, with some of the mountains as backdrop).





Wednesday, 5-Sep, on the way to Guilin airport. They say this is the most scenic highway in China - no wonder (I hope you don't mind a few more photos of these extraordinary Guilin mountains!).





Wednesday, September 5 at 11:46 AM, traveling to Kunming, Yunnan from Guilin Liangjiang International Airport.



So, after arriving in Kunming today, and visited the Yuantong Buddhist Temple.



Also visited Kunming flower market - quite small really, and mostly specialising in cactus and succulents... (adjacent was the bird/fish/cat/dog/turtle/etc market).





On the way back to our hotel in Kunming, we came across a cluster of men apparently wondering about the outcome of cricket fights! (not the Ashes kind, you understand!).



Thursday, 6-Sep: First visit today was to the Golden Temple in Kunming. Not very golden-looking now, but it's called that because it's made completely of copper (the biggest such in China). A Tao temple, but with some Buddhist and Confucian elements.



The Stone Forest! Covers an area of 250 sqkm altogether, but the developed area is only a few km, but very well presented. We were driven around in an electric buggy, and then walked among the Stones. Quite remarkable! Rivals the Guilin mountains!! Also limestone, created about the same time (200-250m years ago, Permian age), as sediment on the ocean floor, followed by uplifting and erosion.





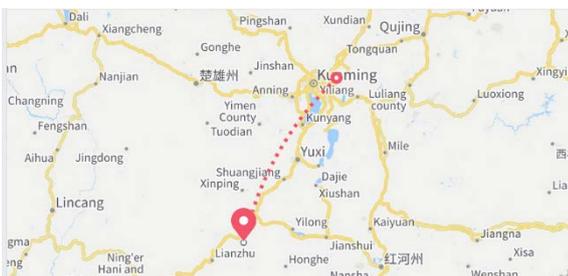


Many of the guides at the Stone Forest were local Sani people in traditional dress. Here's a cluster of 3.



Thursday, 6-Sep: End of a very full day, just in awe of the stone forest. Now off to Lijiang, for some more amazing sights and the (utter) luxury of staying in the same hotel for 2 nights!

Traveling to Lijiang, Yunnan, China from Kunming Changshui International Airport (but the map has got the location of Lijiang wrong – it's actually NNW of Kunming, due N of Dali – on extreme top L of map).



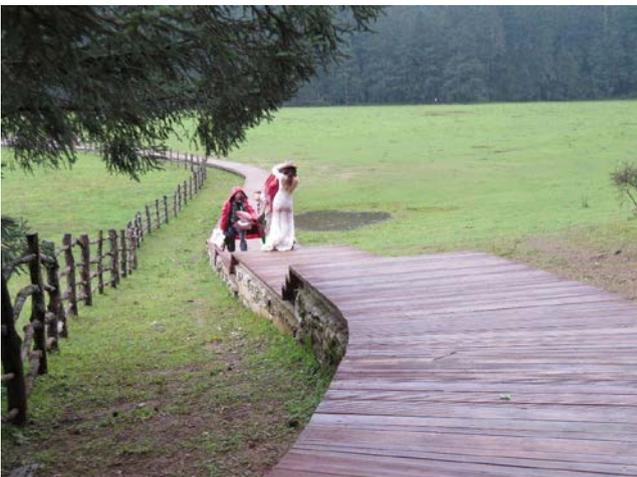
Friday, 7-Sep: Sightseeing in Lijiang today, and nearby. Here is the Black Dragon Pool Park, complete with the "Missing Bridge" (so called because of love tragedies), the temple to a Tibetan general who was idolised after he died (I forget how close we are here to Tibet, as well as Burma, Thailand, etc), and the Dongba Culture Museum (the pictographs they developed, now UNESCO heritage listed).



The entrance gate to a Tibetan Buddhist monastery (Yufeng Lamaism Monastery), and a bunch of ancient ladies dancing for us (in the pouring rain!)



Then up the Jade Dragon Mountains (still raining!) to see Spruce Meadow (3,300m high - just like an Alpine Meadow) - much favoured by soon-to-be-brides on photo-shoots. Followed by the White Water River cascades (and other falls, all swarming with bridal photo-shoots), complete with a couple of Yaks on their way home.

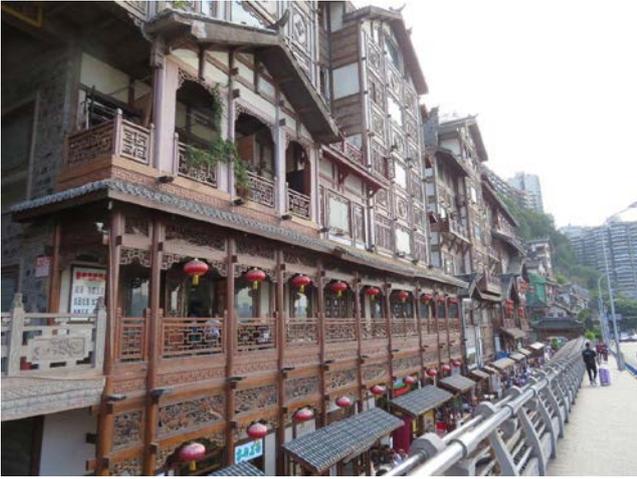




Saturday 8-Sep, 12:30 pm, flying from Lijiang to Chongqing.

We started our cruise in Chongqing, a city of 30 million!!! (actually, that's the administrative district of Chongqing, with the city itself having a mere 8 million - formerly known as Chungking). Here are the People's Palace, the Huguang Museum (relating to immigrant minorities), the Opera House, and the old (restored) district.





We started our amazing cruise on the Yangtse River in Chongqing, but without Internet access, hence my posts were delayed! (Internet **was** available, but at a cost, and I decided to go cold turkey!). Here's the ship we were on, the Century Legend, with 320 passengers and 150 crew; and our cabin...



Sunday, 9-Sep: First stop on the Yangtse was at the village of Shibaozhai, to visit the 12-storey Pagoda cantilevered against the side of a sheer cliff face of a huge rock outcrop, now surrounded by the river (formerly had a small land bridge, but the Three Gorges Dam (see on) has raised the water level).



Lots of fascinating sights to see along the Yangtse (6,300 km in length altogether). For example, at Fengdu is a Ghost Town, overlooked by the King of the Dead (see huge carving in photo); also numerous pagodas of all shapes and sizes, but all wonderful; and occasional bridges now that the technology exists to build them that wide (and they certainly have built huge numbers of modern bridges in China); finally, despite a certain amount of pollution in the river (jetsam and flotsam), fishing is still happening...





Monday, 10-Sep: The first of the Three Gorges on the Yangtse River is the Qutan Gorge, only 8 km long, but quite spectacular. The "tide mark" shows where the water level reaches at its highest nowadays (note the wonderful folding in the exposed rock).



The second of the Three Gorges on the Yangtse River is the Wu Gorge, which is quite long and not as sheer for the most part, but amazing all the same.





Part-way along the Wu Gorge is a little but spectacular gorge (offshoot) called the Shennv (or Goddess) Stream. We had to transfer to small boats. Saw mountain goats on the side; and even caught a glimpse of the Goddess herself (like a little finger just to the Right of the large peak).





Tuesday, 11-Sep: at the end of our cruise on the Yangtse, we visited the Three Gorges Dam. This is one dam which is at the end of the section of the river where the "three gorges" are located (actually, in the middle of the third, the Xiling Gorge). Every statistic is super colossal; eg it took 17 years to build (1993-2009), at a total cost of \$US29B, 45% of which was to compensate the 1.2 million people relocated; 185m high, 15m wide at top; generates 22,400 Megawatts; has dual five-step locks that can take vessels up to 10,000 tonnes. By 2020, the hydro power will be boosted by 40%. Quite some renowned beauty and historical spots were flooded, but others (eg The Goddess gorge) were created. The chief objectives were: control flooding, generate power, improve navigation (now 1,300km of the Yangtse are navigable).



Then we flew to Xi'an.

Wednesday, 12-Sep: Today we went to see the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an, one of the (many) highlights of our journey. They were all destroyed by a rival shortly after Emperor Qin (Qin dynasty of only 15 years

duration, about 220BC) installed them to guard his tomb. Then they were covered over again for over 2,000 years till discovered by a farmer sinking a well in the particularly dry summer of 1974. The only intact warrior was the kneeling bowman. There are over 6,000 of them, with the expectation that another 2,000 will be discovered later. They have been painstakingly put back together in the “hospital”.



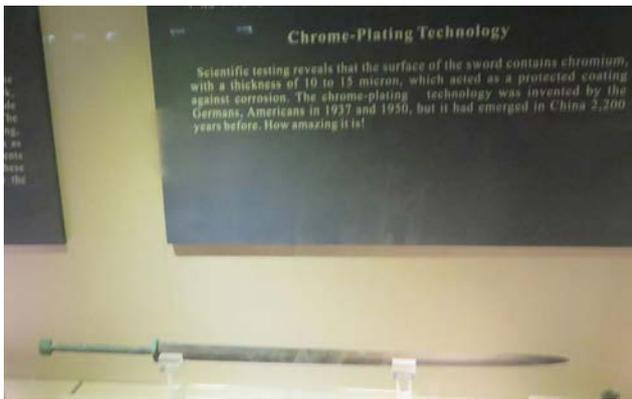


I can't help but post rather more about these astounding terracotta warriors! Here are the faces of 4 of them; all of them are different!





Just a couple more things about these terracotta warriors! They discovered a few weapons (not many, as they were looted when they were raided shortly after installation); that was one of the reasons for raiding, to obtain the weapons. Here's a sword that had chromium edging - 2,000 years before the process was "discovered" in the West. And there was an intact bronze chariot and horses between Qin's tomb and the main body of warriors - complete with operational umbrella!



Back to the centre of Xi'an, to explore the intact walls of the city - 3km by 4km rectangle, 13.87km in length, 18m wide at the base. They were originally made of rammed earth, then upgraded to bricks in 1582.





From the walls, we went to view the Xi'an Great Mosque, which is quite different in design to most mosques - they seem very proud that it has been Chinesified! Certainly different, comprising a series of outside courtyards, a minaret that looks like a pagoda, and the only bit that is familiar is the prayer hall.





Near the mosque is "Muslim Street", a bustling street of shops, cafes, etc, etc. Some of these faces remind me of terracotta warriors! Our guide tells us that Muslims now comprise the largest religious group in China, with some 70 million. She says that most Chinese are now secular (as is she). I haven't asked her how many Christians she thinks there are in China! That's something for our Beijing guide to tell us, as she is a Christian, and will take us to her church on Sunday.



What a full day we have had! Finally, we went to a theatre-restaurant to have a dumpling feast (some 16 different dumplings - a speciality of this region), they being shaped to suggest the contents! Our table overlooked the theatre where a show was staged later.





And here's the show - a wonderful music and dance collection from the Tang Dynasty. I was really surprised that the music was all very pleasant (I've not really much enjoyed what I've heard of Chinese music before); and the dancing and costumes were wonderful - so graceful, etc.





Thursday,13-Sep: Today we took the fast train from Xi'an to Beijing - 1,075km, taking 4.5 hours. Our top speed was 306kmh, which we maintained for much of the journey, stopping only twice on the way. The countryside flashed by! I actually found the countryside quite interesting - not spectacular scenery at all, mostly fairly flat, but fascinating little villages, small fields, predominant corn crops, etc, combined with huge apartment blocks and numerous small power stations and factories...





Friday, 14-Sep: Well, we visited the Great Wall today. Went to the Mutianyu section, favoured by visits from John Major and Bill Clinton... Has a cable car to get you up the last 300m (so you're at about 800m). Started at Watchtower #14 (built in 1404 AD). You can then walk East (as we did for a bit), or backtrack and walk West (as we did), back past Tower #14 to the next Tower or two. Or you can walk on West to Tower #20 - that last section involves a relentless 450 steps up, with the final climb to the Tower involving "scaling" the 20 or so steps (that section of wall can be seen in photos 2, 3 & 7 rising sharply in the distance; photo 4 is looking back down that section). Took about 40 mins to get there, and 30 to return. Of course, some people find it an ideal place to check their social media!









Returning to Beijing from the Great Wall, we enjoyed an absolutely stunning acrobatics show. No wonder the Chinese win all the acrobatic events at the Olympics! Very Cirque-de-Soleil-like. They also had "Sphere of Death" motorcyclists, with a mind-numbing 8 all together in the sphere at the end!

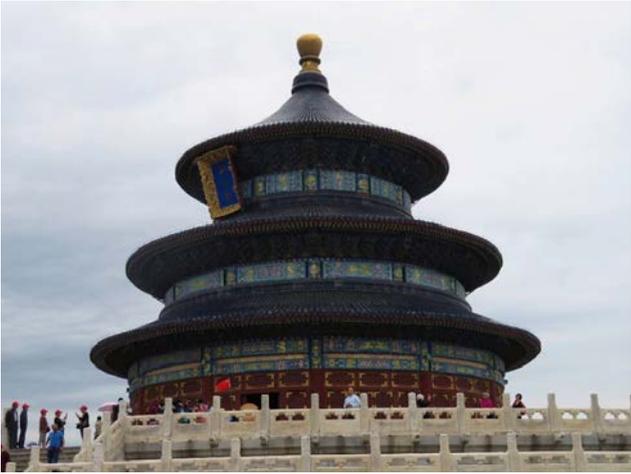




Saturday, 15-Sep: Started the day with a drive to Beijing's Temple of Heaven gardens (648 acres) to have a Taiji lesson from Master Howard.



We then spent a while walking around the Park, visiting the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest, and various other ancient temples and Emperor's places.



From there, we travelled to Tiananmen Square (120 acres). Interesting discussion with local guide about how much she knew about "what really happened"... She knew more than we thought she would (indeed, using Baidu.com (China's Google), I found quite a few sites that spelt it all out, to my surprise).



Then on to the Forbidden City (100 acres), on the edge of Tiananmen Square, with its endless courtyard after courtyard, all with quite marvellous pagoda-style buildings (we *did* say to our guide, "are we there yet?" several times! - relating to reaching where the Emperor lived). We must watch The Last Emperor again... (apparently, quite popular in China).





Sunday, 16-Sep: Here's my travelogue for Sunday (posted a day late) - I spent the evening editing the Australian eResearch Newsletter, which went out early Monday (successfully, I think!). We started Sunday by attending the English-language service of Beijing International City Church. They hold this in a Concert Hall/Theatre which is rented on Sundays - has big capacity, as can be seen in the photo, which filled up fully by the start. Quite a sizeable number of foreigners (hence the church's name), but still predominantly Chinese (mostly visitors, I guess). Very recognisable service if you're used to big, vibrant churches (like Hillsong, Sydney); indeed they have adapted some worship songs from Hillsong (and from Bethel, Redding, USA). Good solid teaching in the sermon. We have been fortunate to have encountered several Chinese Christians in our travels, and have been very impressed and excited about what they have told us about the church in China and the various government controls. One estimate had the numbers at 100 million. There's lots more to relate, but probably not on this medium...



After church, and lunch, we drove by the Olympic Stadium (the "bird's nest") and a host of related buildings, before ending up in the "old quarter" of Beijing - Hutong, where we had a rickshaw ride.



We stopped at a house in Hutong (the old district of Beijing) and had a Calligraphy lesson from our guide in the house's courtyard, to the constant chirruping of 3 crickets in cages. Here are my humble efforts at "Love" on the card, together with "God" on the bookmark.





Monday, 17-Sep, Early Monday morning, we flew out of Beijing on our way home to Perth, via Hong Kong. Visibility was wonderful, though you can see a band of smog in the distance under the mountain range. On our first day in Beijing (Friday) it was quite noticeable - that's the day we went to the Great Wall, and visibility was clearly (!) reduced, though the smell, etc wasn't too bad. The next 2 full days were as clear as a bell, as was Monday morning (apart from that band). Even the traffic (at 5:30am) was minimal!



Traveling to Hong Kong airport from Beijing Capital International Airport. Well, Typhoon Mangkhut seems to have spared our flights (Sunday in HK being the worst). We will have an hour or two in HK before our flight to Perth. Safely checked-in to both. But despite booking and paying for this flight as a Cathay Pacific flight, because it's operated (code share) by Air China, they won't let us into the Cathay lounge on my Qantas FF Gold card. Maybe in HK... (they did!).



Then traveling to Perth, Western Australia from Hong Kong International Airport.



Monday evening, 17-Sep-18: safely home at the end of our amazing adventure!!

Further Reflections:

Development Pace: the pace at which China is developing is staggering. All the cities we visited (big and small) have lots of modern buildings, and all the signs of an advanced economy, including all kinds of infrastructure (roads, rail, bridges, tunnels, power grids, airports, etc). This has all happened in the last 10 (sometimes, 5) years. In Chongqing, a city of 30 million (including surrounding areas), there were no skyscrapers 10 years ago; now hundreds.

Western Dress: almost everyone (except those in traditional dress in tourist spots) wore western dress, drove cars, etc, etc. Indistinguishable from European cities.

Chinese Tourists: everywhere we went there were huge numbers of Chinese tourists; sometimes we were the only Westerners to be seen. There has been a remarkably rapid change in tourism: as little as 5 years ago, places like the Terracotta Warriors were predominantly populated by Western tourists; now it's 95%+ Chinese. The Chinese middle class really has arrived (with money and in numbers) and has discovered tourism, especially in their own country.

Poverty: we saw no signs of serious poverty. We travelled to 6 cities and several towns right across the country, as well as through the countryside by train and car. We saw plenty of farm houses, small villages, etc, but no sign of abject poverty (of course we didn't see everywhere). We did see quite elderly women occasionally doing back-breaking work, eg carrying great loads of bricks on their backs into building sites; and it was clear that some folk still live quite simple lives. We saw no begging at all. And I can't recall seeing any graffiti, either (there was some in Hong Kong).

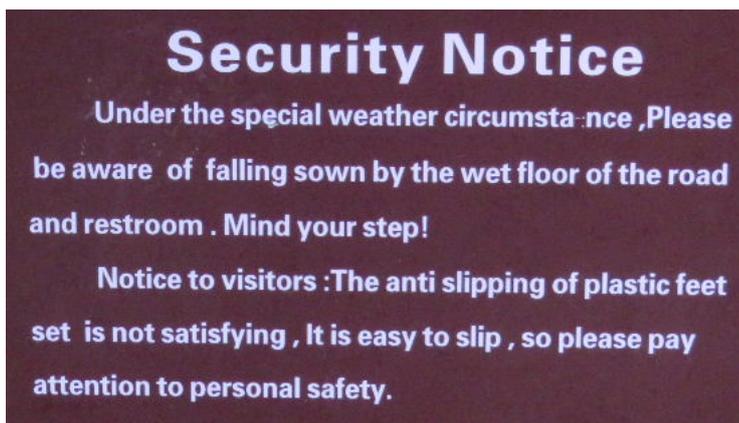
Scoters: especially in the Southern cities & towns, but also in Xi'an and Beijing, the roads were crowded with electric scooters. These are the same size & shape as Vespas, etc, but are electric, so silent. They are treated as bicycles, you don't need a licence to drive them, they are not registered, supposed to be limited to 20kmh (though are capable of 40+); they drive haphazardly everywhere – on the wrong side of the road, on footpaths, etc, often carrying several people (eg dad driving, mum on the back, child in front of dad). Non-one wears helmets (they are required for motorbike riders).

Obeying Rules: there is a curious blending of utter acceptance of the rules and compliance with them (a society with so many people wouldn't work without this), together with a certain amount of flouting of the rules; eg at the start of each concert we attended there was a message (in Chinese and English) forbidding photography or recording, but as soon as the shows started, up popped thousands of phones making recordings; we were warned this would be the case by our guides.

Facial Recognition: we have learned that China is currently piloting the use of CCTV and facial recognition to monitor the movements of its citizens. We do know that this technology is already advanced and deployed – for instance, on the cruise, there are photographers who snap pictures of the guests at every opportunity and then invite you to buy copies (happens on all cruises worldwide). But on our cruise, you checked out the photos by fronting up to a computer, which captures a picture of your face, then brings up every photo it has with your face in it, instantly.

Writing, Language: I was surprised to learn that China now uses “western” numbers everywhere (eg car numberplates). Also, everywhere we went, street signs & notices were almost always in Chinese and in Latin alphabet. Also, that they now write and read Left to Right, rather than the traditional way of Right to Left; I asked how you could decide if a notice or sign was to be read L to R or R to L, and it is determined in part by the context, but also by the use of the modernised vs traditional script.

Of course, although many signs in the tourist spots were in English as well as Chinese, the English was sometimes quite wonderfully quaint; here are some examples:



In most Elevators:

“No horseplay in elevator”

“No playing jumping”

“Please don't slap the door and force it open”

“Please don't push the buttons randomly”





Notice on bus.



Notice on escalator.



Another notice on escalator.