

MY TRIP TO CHINA

My trip to the People's Republic of China initially had a two-fold purpose: to see the Great Wall near Beijing and the Terracotta Warriors of ancient Xian. Beyond that, I must confess, I was woefully ignorant of Chinese history and culture and wasn't really sure what I would be witnessing on my journey to the Middle Kingdom. I chose a guided tour for this very reason, so I wouldn't have to prepare my own itinerary. Having now concluded the trip, I can honestly say all my preconceived notions concerning the Chinese were wrong. What I encountered, instead, was a remarkably industrious country (albeit with some *monumental* pollution problems), a land mass about as big as the continental United States (and just as diverse), incredible scenes of natural beauty (especially in the southern regions) and an ambitious government-driven zeal to modernize and propel its citizenry forward. A cultural discovery, if you will. My tour vastly exceeded my expectations, and hopefully this journal will bear witness to that.

My trip took root back in October 2010, two months after returning from a tour of Egypt. Although I enjoyed my Egyptian adventure immensely, the August timing was a bit brutal in terms of the weather and I vowed never to take another vacation that late in the summer. I had just read an article about the Terracotta Warriors in some historical publication and decided to check out the various tour companies specializing in Chinese travel, to see if it would be more feasible to go in early spring. Of the twenty or so websites I visited, the only group that really stood out – in terms of value – was China Spree Tours. A fairly new company, with only five years in operation, it was nonetheless recommended by many travelers on the Frommer's website. Glowing reviews, and a stated commitment to making their tours a 'cultural exploration', convinced me to choose them for my guided tour.

To prepare for my trip I began scouring the Internet for any news concerning the Mainland, and read a Fodor's travel book on China a friend gave me for Christmas. The Arab Spring uprisings in the early part of 2011 gave rise to concerns that the Chinese government would begin cracking down harshly on any similar types of pro-democracy demonstrations in their

own country; subsequently, Beijing began censoring Internet information regarding events in the Middle East. I was a bit apprehensive about how this might interfere with my trip.

I heeded the travel guidebook suggestions concerning vaccinations. Although there are no current immunization requirements for travel to China, it is recommended that foreigners be immunized against Hepatitis A and B, and receive a tetanus booster. Visiting China also requires a visa. After some research into the matter I decided it would be far easier to just pay China Spree Tours an additional fee to obtain the visa for me. The process took nearly a month, and waiting for the safe return of my passport via courier service proved to be more stressful than I anticipated (a private courier service was used, not the U.S. Mail, and my passport was temporarily 'misplaced'). But finally, after months of preparation, research and last minute scares, on April 18th, 2011, I took a taxi to Miami International Airport and boarded an early morning American Airlines flight to JFK to begin my adventure....

Days One and Two

My plane arrived in New York City almost twenty minutes early. A series of storm fronts were ravishing the southeastern part of the country during that time and the flight to JFK was 'bumpier' than usual, with the pilot making numerous admonishments to stay secured in our seats due to severe turbulence. Perhaps this is why we arrived early; the pilot 'hit the gas' to avoid as much of the stormy weather as possible. Needless to say I was incredibly relieved when we touched down in the Big Apple. By 10:30am I collected my luggage and said goodbye to the Dominican woman who sat next to me on the plane. She was visiting her daughter in New York City and didn't relish the cold weather. Whenever we hit a pocket of turbulence we would clutch our armrests and give each other funny looks to break the tension.

My Air China flight was not scheduled to depart until 5:00pm and the check-in counters only opened four hours prior to departure, so I made my way up to the food court in Terminal 8 and had an early lunch. For reading materials I brought along a stack of Time magazines (dating back several

months), which I had neglected to read back home. I sat in the food court eating and drinking coffee for several hours, keeping abreast of current events. As it turned out, several of my fellow tour members were also waiting in the food court; we just hadn't made each other's acquaintance yet.

By 1:00pm the counter at Air China opened and I went downstairs and checked myself in. I previously reserved all my seating arrangements on Air China (a total of six flights) by phone, requesting all aisles seats. Over the past decade I have developed – curiously enough – a bit of claustrophobia and need to sit in an aisles seat in order to keep my anxieties at a comfortable level. But I really lucked out this time. I was able to switch to one of the exit row seats, which afforded me a lot of space and legroom for the flight over. I was particularly happy because my physician had given me a subscription for Ambien – to get some much needed sleep on the plane and help ease my jet lag – and the extra legroom meant I could really stretch out and get some rest. Granted, I don't know how effective I would have been as an 'exit row passenger' in case of an actual emergency, groggy with sleep medication and all, but chances were I probably wouldn't have understood all the frantic Chinese instructions being barked at me, *anyway*.

After check-in and clearing security, I still had to wait several more hours before boarding. The flight left on time. All in all, it was not a bad trip, despite a very poor in-flight entertainment system; the movies, at least in my compartment, were barely viewable and had large Chinese character subtitles emblazoned across the bottom of the screen that proved to be a tremendous distraction. After the first meal was served I took an Ambien and was able to sleep for more than five hours. In fact, after the second meal was served I managed to get some more sleep; as a result, the thirteen-hour flight didn't seem *too* long.

I arrived in Beijing shortly after 6:00pm (local time) on the following day. China is twelve hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time so I lost a day going there and gained it on the way back. Interesting to note there is only one local time in China regardless of the region, which means it could be nighttime by six o'clock in one part of the country and still be daylight in another. When I was getting off the plane I spotted a few other members of my tour group through the color-coded nametags we wore around our necks: Michael St. Clair, a retired college professor from Boston, who was the only other member traveling by himself, and Steven and Susan Raab from Philadelphia, who run an online business. We proceeded to the airport train

service together and made our way to the luggage claim area in the nearby terminal. After collecting our things we cleared customs and met Lisa, our wonderful national tour guide, together with an assistant, who were waiting for us with a China Spree welcome sign.

Half of our tour group had arrived on the same flight from JFK. We waited about 30 minutes in the terminal building for the remaining members who were flying in from San Francisco. In addition to Michael, Steven, Susan and myself, the other members of the Best Treasures China Tour were: Jon and Sharon Spahr, retired judge and educator, from Ohio; Bill and Wendy Steiger, retired colonel and educator, from South Carolina (Bill and Sharon were brother and sister); Gail Hendricks (tour operator) and her 13 year old granddaughter, Rachael, from Boston; Marcel Roy and his wife Christiane Brissette, computer programmer and nurse, from Quebec, but now living in Ft. Meyers, Florida; Gerry Walker and Patricia Reuter, retired, from the Oregon/Washington area; Delores Chew (librarian) and her sister Ying Hart, from California and Boston, respectively; young newlyweds Duong Tran and Quynh Ngo from California; Jim and Vickie Rabourn, machinist/musician and educator, from California.

One of the things that made this trip so memorable was the aforementioned group. We bonded almost immediately. When the last of our tour members arrived, Lisa led us to an awaiting bus and we proceeded to the Marriott Beijing City Wall Hotel in the Dongcheng district of downtown Beijing, not far from Tiananmen Square. It was already evening by the time we arrived at our beautiful hotel and most of us were exhausted from our long flights, but we still marveled at our first view of China. The capital was large and modern, its tall buildings and streets lit up, teeming crowds filling the sidewalks. After checking into our rooms I went across the street and purchased some snacks at a small convenience store, having changed one hundred American dollars into 640 yuans (RMB) at the hotel. I returned to my room and tried to watch the International CNN broadcast but soon fell asleep.

Day Three

Lisa had scheduled a wake up call for everyone at six in the morning, but most of us, due to jet lag, were wide-awake way before then. I was up by four and made two cups of coffee in my room; setting aside the clothes I would be wearing while in Beijing. As soon as the hotel's restaurant opened at 5:00am I went downstairs for breakfast. All of our morning meals were served buffet style (both western and local cuisine) at the hotels, while our other meals were taken on the road in local restaurants. For me, the morning buffets were a safe haven, with recognizable foods like scrambled eggs and bacon. I made sure to eat my fill during this time because I never knew what culinary 'adventures' awaited us later in the day.

This particular morning only Gerry and Patricia were having breakfast when I arrived. Each day I tried to sit with different members to get to know them better. Gerry and Patricia were both retired; it was difficult for me to guess their ages... perhaps mid-seventies or early eighties...but they'd been together 55 years and had done quite a bit of traveling. Patricia was left legally blind as a result of a car accident three years earlier and Gerry was constantly by her side aiding her and giving her a detailed description of everything around us. Frankly, it was one of the most beautiful relationships I've ever witnessed and gave me hope that romantic love can endure the passage of time. (Um, I've included this sappy observation for my girlfriend Maria, who reads all my journals).

By 8:00am our group assembled in the lobby and we boarded the bus for our first stop – *Tiananmen Square*. Although the distance to the great square was not very far, it took us a while because of the enormous traffic jams (which we encountered everywhere we went in China). This allowed our tour director, Lisa, more time to introduce herself and explain the purpose of the tour. She told us this would be more of a 'discovery' than a vacation, explaining that perhaps we might experience some things which are not pleasant, such as the traffic jams or airport delays or even local foods that are not to our liking, but this was all part of the cultural experience. She asked us to keep an open mind and a friendly attitude. She also warned us there could be moments on the trip when she might have to change from the *sweet* national guide we saw before us, to the screeching Dragon Lady of cultural lore! What she meant by this – and we sometimes witnessed it first hand – was that whenever we encountered problems concerning government bureaucracy or inferior service, she would have to pounce like a mythical beast – on our behalf – to straighten out the dilemma. Lisa was 39 years old, and a former translator for the national government, and had worked in the

tourism field for many years. She was not easily intimidated, knowing full well how the system worked, hence the Dragon Lady persona. To us, she was simply wonderful. And I gave her the more likeable moniker of *Dragon Mom*.

When Lisa was finished, she introduced our local guide, Wilson. At every major city or town we visited there was a local guide who would accompany us on the day's excursions, giving us the cultural and historical lowdown. Like Lisa, their English was usually very good, although their personalities were quite different. Wilson was one of my favorites. His real Chinese name was probably too hard to pronounce for most westerners, and like all Chinese who deal with foreigners he had adopted a western name for convenience sake. What I particularly liked about Wilson was his sense of humor and the personal cultural insights he gave us, much of it stemming from his own family history. For example, his grandfather had been a captain in Chiang Kai-shek's army, and had fought against Mao's forces. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's his family had been singled out and viciously attacked by overzealous cadres. Wilson was born in 1978, the same year Deng Xiaoping, the pragmatist leader who emerged following Mao's death in 1976, proclaimed that capitalism was good and encouraged Chinese citizens to start businesses, ushering in a new dawn of progressive economic policies that would later transform the entire country. Wilson is part of this new generation of Chinese who seem less interested in communist dogma and more concerned with economic and civil freedoms. I enjoyed and appreciated his candor. As we drove around Beijing he would give us brief history lessons on this fascinating city.

The capital of China is located in the North China Plain, an area ideally suited for human growth and expansion. The city is considered one of the great 'cradles' of civilization, starting with the discovery of Peking Man, a species of *Homo erectus* whose bones were found in a cave near Beijing and lived more than 500,000 years ago, and hosting a continuous community of inhabitants since the Neolithic Age. Due to its long cultural history, there are many areas currently listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Beijing – the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, the Ming Tombs, the Peking Man site at Zhoukoudian – making this region one of the greatest treasure troves of ancient relics in the world. Today, the city has developed into a modern international complex of highways and glittering skyscrapers spread out over more than a dozen urban districts, maintaining an ever-shifting population of approximately 18-

20 million people. The municipal government is under the direct administration of the central government. The city itself has undergone many architectural changes throughout its history, having been destroyed, in parts, by numerous invading hordes or foreign powers. But it always springs back, stronger and newer than before, and as we drove around its districts we could sense this dynamism.

Although early in the morning, by the time we arrived at Tiananmen Square the site was already packed with visitors. This is the largest urban square in the world today, covering an area up to 440,000 square meters in length, accommodating more than a million people. The site is geographically situated on the intersection where the longitudinal and latitudinal axes of Beijing cross over each other. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Tiananmen Square was a closed square, but following the nationalist Revolution of 1911 it was opened to the public and has been rebuilt and expended several times since. The term *Tian'anmen* means Heaven's Pacification, and the square is named after the Tiananmen Gate (the entrance into the Forbidden City), which lies just north, across Chang'an Avenue.

Used as a massive gathering place since its creation, the vast flatness of the square is interrupted by the 125-foot tall Monument to the People's Heroes, and the Mao Mausoleum. It is sandwiched between two ancient gates, Tiananmen Gate to the north and Zhengyangmen Gate (referred locally as Qianmen) to the south. Along the west side of the square is the Great Hall of the People, where the National People's Congress meets, and on the east side is the National Museum of China, which dedicates itself to Chinese history prior to 1919. And while trees line the east and west edges of the square, it is basically a very wide, open lot.

On the day we visited Tiananmen Square there must have been tens of thousands of people lined up to enter Mao's Mausoleum, forming a queue that meandered around a good portion of the square. Wilson told us many of the people who stand in line for hours to view Mao's preserved body are peasants from the rural areas paying their respects to the Great Leader, who revolutionized their way of life by giving the lands back to the farmers following the Communist takeover of 1949.

There is a strong sense of history in Tiananmen Square, having been the center of so many important gatherings, including the now famous student

uprising of 1989, which was quickly crushed by the military. And while the area is impressive due to its sheer size, quite frankly – after a few photos ops – we were ready to move on to the more imposing Forbidden City on the northern edge of the square. We made our way north and crossed the huge Chang’an Avenue (used for major parades) and got on line to enter the Tiananmen Gate entrance into the Forbidden City. A large portrait of Chairman Mao hangs above the center of the Gate, known also as the Meridian Gate. This portrait is just below a section of the balcony where Mao proclaimed in 1949 that China was now a communist country. The amount of Chinese tourists here was staggering. We literally entered the great City shoulder to shoulder.

The term Forbidden City is from an English translation of the Chinese word *Zijin Cheng*, which means Purple Forbidden City (Note: the main color of all the buildings within the City is, in fact, a purplish hue). It was referred to as ‘forbidden’ because, aside from members of the Imperial household, no one could enter unless the Emperor gave permission. Today, Chinese call the grounds *Gugong*, or Former Palace, and the buildings within its walls are more commonly referred to as the Palace Museum. Only the central sections of the grounds are open to the public, extending from the Tiananmen Gate to the Martial Spirit Gate.

Between 1406 and 1911, China was ruled from behind the walls of this Imperial City. Twenty-four emperors from the Ming and Qing dynasties called this place home. It is the largest palace complex in the world, sitting on 178 acres, a rectangular compound enclosed by a 10-meter high wall reinforced to withstand cannonball fire and surrounded by a 6-meter moat. In addition, there are numerous guard towers along the perimeter of the wall. Within the City are five great halls, seventeen palaces and numerous other buildings, much of them closed to the public. The entire complex reflects not only traditional Chinese construction art, but also the *cultural* art of ancient China, embodying the feudal hierarchy and the traditional theory of *Feng Shui*, the practice of placing objects or buildings in a manner which affect the positive flow of energy, and the Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water).

The City was divided into two parts, each with distinct functions. The Outer Court consists of the southern and center sections, and has three main halls, including the magnificent Hall of Supreme Harmony, and served ceremonial purposes such as coronations, investitures, imperial weddings,

and also contained the Imperial Library and archives. The Inner Court, along the northern, western and eastern parts, had three halls used for the day-to-day affairs of state. This was also the area where the emperor lived with his family, eunuchs and maidservants. The entire complex was built during a fifteen year period between 1406 and 1421, utilizing over 100,000 skilled technicians and a labor force exceeding one million workers.

Once we entered the Tiananmen Gate, we slowly made our way down the center of the Forbidden City, heading north along the central axis line towards the Martial Spirit Gate, at the other end. We passed through several large courtyards connecting the Hall of Supreme Harmony, Hall of Middle Harmony and the Hall of Preserving Harmony (the ceremonial and archival sections of the City) admiring the Chinese architecture and getting a glimpse of the furnishings inside the buildings (which you cannot enter) through open doors and windows. There were dragon symbols everywhere, both as statues and as adornments on rooftops. The dragon is a good luck symbol; it served to protect the people from her enemies and sprouted water (not fire), which is one of the elements of life.

When we reached the middle point of the central axis line we crossed the Gate of the Heavenly Purity into the Inner Court section of the Forbidden City where the emperor and his family lived and conducted affairs of the state. We came upon the Palace of Heavenly Purity and the Palace of Earthly Tranquility and beyond that the Imperial Gardens, an area covering 11,000 square meters, with centuries old pine trees, cypresses and bamboo interspersed with manmade hills and natural rock displays. As beautiful as it all was, by the time we exited through the Gate of Martial Spirit, overlooking Jingshan Park, the courtyards and purplish buildings all started to look the same to me.

Throughout the tour our various guides would hold up a China Spree Flag (which Lisa adorned with a stuffed dragon her daughter gave her) so we could easily distinguish our group from the throngs massing around us. In case you haven't been following current events, China is the most populous country on earth, with over 1.3 *billion* people. No matter where we went there were always large crowds, and if you weren't paying attention it was easy to get lost during some of these walking jaunts. On more than one occasion I had to frantically look up over this 'sea of bodies' and search out that stuffed dragon atop the flag to find my group! We followed Wilson out the Martial Spirit Gate exit and walked along the moat on the north side of

the Forbidden City until we reached a street corner where we boarded our awaiting tour bus. Free bottled water was provided onboard. I sat, gulping down my water, thoroughly exhausted from an entire morning of walking.

We drove through the crowded streets to one of the Hutong districts of old Beijing. The Hutongs are a neighborhood network of squat courtyard homes connected by a maze of narrow lanes and twisting alleyways that once comprised what is considered the old city of Beijing. Millions of Chinese still live in these traditional neighborhoods (Wilson grew up in one) but they are increasingly susceptible to modernization, as the central government continues to demolish and rebuild the inner cities. Some Hutong districts have been preserved for historical purposes. Tour buses cannot traverse the narrow, winding roadways here, so we disembarked and got into bicycle-powered rickshaws, caravanning down the alleyways and streets in a harrowing dash towards the center of one Hutong district where we would be served lunch inside an actual courtyard home.

Madame Fong was the owner of the courtyard home. Her traditional Hutong apartment was located in a walled courtyard nestled together with 15 other apartments. When I say 'home' I'm really referring to a one-room apartment, with a foyer/corridor and a small kitchen section. All of the family's activities are centered in the living room. There were two tables prepared for us. Madame Fong (and her daughter) prepared our lunch.

This was our first Chinese meal, setting the tone for the rest of the trip. Bowls and plates of food were placed in the center of the table and we took turns helping ourselves and passing the food around, or, in the case of all the restaurants, turning a Lazy Susan. I only saw a menu *twice* during my entire stay in China. Dish after dish of mostly hot foods were placed in front of us, proving to be quite a culinary adventure each time we sat down to eat. Since the majority of our meals were taken this way, and in local restaurants or eateries, we got a very representative sampling of traditional Chinese cooking. I happen to like Asian cuisine, and in particular Chinese cooking, but much of what we ate did not resemble the kinds of Chinese dishes we normally get back in the States. Most of the food was delicious (or, at times, *unique*) everywhere we went. There were a lot of pork and poultry dishes with vegetables, and various types of tofu and eggplant dishes, and while the cooking style may have been the same, the spices were different, or, in certain areas of the country, like the wheat-growing Xian region, there was more emphasis on dumplings or noodles than rice.

Our first authentic Chinese meal was a hit. Appetizers of coated peanuts, biscuits and what looked like string-potatoes, followed by bowls of chicken legs, pork with veggies, dumplings, stewed tomatoes and scrambled eggs, green beans and garlic. Madame Fong prepared more than ten dishes, and although our plates were the size of saucer holders, the bowls of food kept making the rounds until we were all full. Traditionally, a Chinese meal ends when fruit is placed on the table. I think we got orange slices. Madame Fong then addressed our group (to applause) – with Lisa interpreting – welcoming us to her home and telling her story and how she came to serve food for China Spree travelers, and basically describing life in the Hutong. She fielded questions from us and then demonstrated how to make dumplings. The shape of the dumplings has something to do with good-luck symbols...a Feng Shui approach to cooking!

After lunch, Jon and I asked if there was a bathroom we could use and Wilson escorted us down a narrow series of alleyways to a communal restroom used by the entire courtyard (all fifteen families!). The bathroom was tiled but contained no stalls, urinals or sinks. Two stainless steel holes, separated only by a length of two meters, served as the ‘toilets’. This meant that if two people needed to move their bowels at the same time, they would literally be squatting side-by-side. In one corner was a stainless steel drain that I imagined was used as a makeshift urinal. I couldn’t believe that fifteen families shared this tiny facility.

From here we re-boarded our awaiting rickshaws and zigzagged our way back through the Hutong district to the tour bus. Our next stop was a photo-op at the ‘Bird’s Nest’, the nickname for the new stadium built for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. A magnificent jumble of steel, it reminded me less of a bird’s nest and more like a loosely threaded knitting ball. Either way, it was a beautiful stadium, with the Olympic Tower nearby. The only drawback was the smog, which, coupled with blowing sands from the Gobi Desert, made visibility poor (the Olympic logo was almost obscured in the haze). My eyes actually began to sting at one point. Beijing is known for its poor air quality; throughout our stay in the capital I observed many people wearing surgical masks.

We headed back to the Marriott. I managed to take a 45-minute nap and freshen up before gathering in the lobby for dinner. Once again, we piled into the bus for a rush-hour traffic experience into the Central Business

District where we would be having a special ‘welcome’ dinner of Beijing (or Peking) Duck at a very high-scale eatery called Huajia Yiyuan Restaurant. The place catered to a very affluent clientele, the parking lot was filled with Mercedes, Audi’s, and Lexus vehicles. I felt like a cheap tourist walking through the restaurant in my nylon safari travel shirt while the Chinese customers donned their best dress suits. But, *hey*. We were divided into two separate round tables each with a Lazy Susan set-up. A chef came out and sliced our duck in record speed. Beijing Duck is the specialty meal of the Chinese capital. Whenever important guests arrive this is the traditional meal that is served. The duck is usually fed non-stop for about thirty days, until it is really fat, then it is killed and marinated in special seasonings for several more days before being slow-roasted until all the fat has burned off and the skin is crispy. It is served with thin pancakes that you wrap around the duck meat (adding veggies and sauce) and then eat like a lumpy mini burrito. It was indeed delicious, but a little too labor-intensive for me. Personally, I preferred the other dishes on the Lazy Susan: spicy tofu, steamed broccoli, Kung Pao chicken, spicy pork, plain and special fried rice. *What a feast!*

On the way to the restaurant, which is privately owned, Wilson told us a fascinating story about the first business owner in Post-Mao China. When Deng Xiaoping announced in 1978 that Chinese citizens could now apply for business licenses and open their own private businesses, nobody did. During the *Let 100 Flowers Bloom* campaign of the fifties, and the *Cultural Revolution* of the sixties, Chinese citizens were encouraged to take risks...and then harshly attacked afterwards. Nobody believed the government when they said they would permit citizens to own private businesses. It wasn’t until *three years later* that a widow – down on her financial luck following the death of her husband – decided to open a two-table restaurant in Beijing. Today, her restaurant consists of several floors. On the wall of the lobby is the framed original business license, the first one supposedly issued in China.

Even though it was still relatively early by the time we returned to the hotel, most of us were exhausted from the jet lag and a full day of sightseeing and the group pretty much called it a night. Besides, we needed our rest; the next day was the much-heralded trip to the Great Wall.

Day Four

I awoke shortly after 3:00am, unable to sleep further, even with the assistance of Ambien. Throughout our trip, persistent jet lag plagued many members of the group. I did not get into a good sleeping rhythm until the second week. As I did each morning, I made several cups of instant coffee in my hotel room using the kettle next to the mini-fridge, and watched CNN. To my chagrin, CNN became increasingly obsessed with its own reporting of the upcoming royal wedding in London, devoting more and more of their airtime programming to cover the event as the days went by. I don't mean to come across as a callous misanthrope, but there is only so much of this shit a guy can take. Unfortunately, this was the only international news channel in English.

I had to wait until six for the hotel's restaurant to open, and I made sure to 'stock up' since we would be having a late lunch. By 8:00am we were on the tour bus making our way slowly out of the city in nail-biting traffic. Once we cleared the city limits, the urban landscape gave way to woodlands and farming areas. Everywhere we went, in or around Beijing, there was evidence of new building construction, much of it done for the 2008 Olympics. On the highway heading out towards Mutianyu we could see numerous housing projects under construction. In fact, the whole country seemed to be under one massive reconstruction effort, which led to the following joke: What is the national bird of China? The (building) crane!

Our first stop prior to the Great Wall was at the Sacred Way of Ming Tombs in the Changping District, 50 kilometers northwest of Beijing. Built over a 200-year period (from 1409 to 1644) the site is actually a tomb cluster for the Ming Dynasty, situated at the foot of Mt. Yan. This spectacular cemetery contains the mausoleums of 13 Ming Emperors (plus 23 empresses and one lucky concubine). The grounds are included in the World Heritage List by UNESCO. Mountains surround the eastern, western and northern sides of the mausoleum area with a small basin in the middle, linking up with the Beijing Plain to the south, forming a natural barrier. Two of these mountains appear to be guarding the entrance to the tombs.

Although the 13 mausoleums are different in scale and size, they're essentially the same in form: each emperor's tomb was constructed at the foot of a small hill, and all shared a main roadway known as the Sacred Way, believed to be a divine path leading to Heaven. I'm not sure if the tombs were not available for public viewing at that hour, or if we just didn't have enough time, but what we visited was not the burial sites but rather the best-preserved pathway referred to as the Sacred Way of Ming Tombs. At its entrance is a huge stone archway (the largest in China today), and past it lies the Shengong Shengde Stele Pavilion, containing a 50-ton tortoise statue carrying a stone tablet. The pavilion also houses statues of mythical beasts that face both inward and outward to remind the Emperors' ghosts not to cling to the palace or stay away for too long. Beyond this are two roof pillars on each side of the sacred road, and then a series of 18 pairs of statues, evenly spaced, sculpted out of single stone blocks, depicting various larger-than-life size animals and mythical beasts and, oddly enough, *civil servants*. At the end of all this is the Dragon and Phoenix Gate. The whole roadway is beautifully landscaped with trees flanking the sides.

About a fifteen-minute drive later we entered the parking lot of the Run-Ze Jade Garden, an official jade company run by the national government. According to Lisa, the proliferation of fake jade circulating in the West (more commonly known on the street as 'Beijing Jade') prompted the national government to open this particular establishment to sell authentic jade jewelry and art backed by certificates of authenticity. I was particularly leery of 'government stores', having visited Egypt the previous summer and being taken (in more ways than one) to these same kind of 'official' tourist shops. But this appeared to be the real McCoy.

A woman named Monica, who had an uncanny resemblance to a Chinese Meryl Streep, met us in the lobby. She introduced herself as the chief jewelry designer of the Run-Ze Jade Garden and gave us a brief lecture on the various quality of jade and how it is formed into jewelry, taking us through the craftsmen shops where jade was being sculpted and processed. Monica had the unusual habit of saying "excuse me" whenever she ended a sentence or thought, like the way we would say "anyway", and it was a little confusing listening to her and then simultaneously turning around to see who she was 'excusing'. By the time I realized this was her personal style of speaking the lecture was over and we were ushered into one of the nicest jewelry display areas I have ever seen. There were jewelry and sculptures on sale, with young, nicely dressed, friendly, English-speaking salespeople on

hand. My sales resistance melted in a heartbeat. I was immediately drawn to the pendant displays, where a very likeable Chinese salesgirl convinced me that I definitely needed to purchase two pendants: a purple one for my daughter, and a green one for my girlfriend. I didn't know if the price was right and I asked Lisa for some advice on the matter; she thought the cost was reasonable, so I went ahead and bought the two items.

We were allowed thirty minutes to shop before being escorted upstairs to what had to be the most conveniently located restaurant in all of China! Once again, our group was divided into two tables. Plate after plate of Chinese dishes appeared from somewhere...I was too busy twirling the Lazy Susan and grabbing my share of the grub to even bother finding out where all this food was coming from. By the time the sliced fruit made its appearance I was stuffed to the max!

After lunch, we got back on the bus and drove for another 30 or so minutes to Huairou County, passing through more scenic countryside and mountain ranges, towards the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall. It had been drizzling earlier and as we pulled into the parking lot there weren't as many tour buses as I had expected. Better for us! We made our way up the small hill towards the cable car lift, walking by a phalanx of souvenir vendors who set up shop along the pathway, and then proceeded to board the cable cars four at a time. I must admit, I was scared senseless once those cars lifted up into the air, thinking that perhaps they weren't designed to hold the weight of four 'good-sized' Americans. I decided not to look down as we inched our way up the mountain towards the Great Wall. But once we reached the top the view was phenomenal.

The Great Wall of China is reportedly over 5500 miles long, each section originally designed to protect a specific area of China from foreign invaders. First built in the mid-6th Century by the Northern Qi Dynasty, the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall was later expanded and strengthened during the Ming Dynasty; its main function was to defend the northern border into Beijing and the Ming Tombs. This is probably the best-preserved area of the wall, and easily one of the largest, constructed with mostly granite blocks. The walls here are 7-8 meters high and the walkway has a width of 4-5 meters, capable of accommodating several military horses riding abreast. Along the 1.4-mile stretch of the Mutianyu section are 22 watchtowers, which are unique in that both the inner and outer parapets are crenellated with merlons so that archers could fire at the enemy from both sides of the

wall, a very rare feature. Snaking its way up and down the Mutianyu Mountain Pass, the wall was absolutely marvelous to look at. Chairman Mao once said if you didn't visit the Great Wall at least once during your lifetime, then you were not a good Chinese. *Well, I must be a good Chinese then.*

Lisa gave us two and a half hours to 'climb the wall'; the high point was a section that included an arduous climb up narrow stone steps. I tried to make it to the top, but alas, my 230-pound frame made it rough going, and I stopped just at the base of these steps, which, in my defense, took quite a hike to reach. Jon and Sharon accompanied me about half way but Jon had injured his knee while jogging in the States and decided to turn back. The jarring sensation of walking on these granite stones made it difficult on the joints. Only Marcel and Christiane managed to climb all the way to the top (and, boy, did they rub it in).

It was quite chilly that day up in the mountains, but all that up and down wall trekking made me break into a sweat. Luckily, there weren't many tourists on this day and I was able to take some really nice photographs of the wall. Looking over the side and through the watchtower terraces at the forested mountains below, I could only imagine what it must have been like for an invading army trying to mount an attack against this defensive barrier. In fact, the only reason the Manchu were able to finally breach the Wall in 1644 was because a former Ming border general, upset over the activities of the new Shun dynasty rulers, opened the gates at the Shanhaiguan Pass (along the eastern edge) *and let them in!*

I met up with Steven and Susan on the way back to the lift and we shared a cable car down. When the car left the boarding station it almost appeared as if we were going to fall off the side of the mountain; I let out a gasp as we swung in midair momentarily before descending. When we reached the bottom we had to walk down the hill past the vendors who knew that it was now or never if they wanted to make a sale, seeing as how we were heading back to our bus to leave the site. One particularly aggressive vendor (a tiny old woman who wouldn't take 'no' for an answer) actually blocked my path and wouldn't let me proceed until I negotiated with her over the cost of an **I Climbed The Great Wall** T-shirt. Actually, I can't complain, because I made out like a *Mongolian bandit*: one t-shirt, a panda bear stuffed animal, five Great Wall baseball caps and three souvenir magnets for only \$14!

The ride back to Beijing was brutal; a two and a half hour traffic mess caused by a horrible highway accident. Apparently, a flatbed truck overturned and, by the crushed look of the cab, it seemed obvious the driver hadn't survived the wreck. What *really* surprised me was that we did not see more of these accidents. I thought I had witnessed just about everything in terms of bad driving (having lived in the Philippines for five and a half years, and then my recent trips to Mexico City and Cairo), but it takes a real pair of *cojones* to venture into traffic in this country. Throughout our trip, I refused to sit in the front of the bus for this very reason. The thought of viewing our bus drivers weaving in and out of lanes was too much for me. I sat in the back and prayed for the best.

We arrived at the Marriott by 6:30pm, exhausted, and had only thirty minutes to freshen up. By 7:00pm we gathered in the lobby and walked a block down the street to a local restaurant for dinner. It was another Lazy Susan-bowl-passing experience, and by now, only two days into our tour, the food was all starting to look the same. Not that it was bad, mind you, just...*the same*. We sat in a private room, divided into two tables again. During dinner our group shared stories about past travels. Get a roomful of seasoned travelers together and you will hear some interesting tales. Jim and Vickie talked about their struggling hippy/musician days living out of a van in Europe; Steven and Susan talked about their backpacking experience in London when they were younger; Marcel and Christiane shared their adventures in the Bolivian salt flats; I described my Peace Corps days in the Philippines. We got into a debate on the pros and cons of guided touring as opposed to going it alone. Personally, my backpacking days are over. I've reached a certain stage in my life where I need certain amenities when I travel...*like a clean toilet!* I have taken several guided tours in recent years and I enjoy leaving the details to others. I no longer see the thrill in spending an entire day trying to figure out a train schedule in some foreign city. Give me a Dragon Mom any day!

After dinner we went back to our hotel rooms. We would be flying to Xian the following day and had to put our bags out early. I was so tired from the Great Wall I slept almost seven hours.

Day Five

I placed my luggage in the hallway at 7:00am and proceeded to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, sitting with Michael, Gail and Rachael. Over our breakfast conversation I discovered that 13-year-old Rachael had a brother named Richard – coincidentally, my name is Richard and I have a daughter named Rachel! – and that she was traveling with her grandmother Gail because several years earlier her older brother had gone on safari to South Africa with his grandmother, and to compensate, Gail promised to take her granddaughter to China when she was old enough. I also discovered that both Michael and Gail had been to China previously; Michael about four years ago, and Gail in 1994. Michael is a collector of Chinese art. He spent his first full day in Beijing (while we were at the Forbidden City) shopping for a vase, which he later had to nurse in his backpack throughout the trip to prevent it from breaking. Gail couldn't believe how much the Chinese capital had changed in the seventeen years since *her* last visit. Back then, she said, the streets of Beijing were filled with bicycles, not cars. Wilson told us the phenomenon of city traffic is a fairly new one, with most people (in the cities, anyway) only trading in their two-wheelers for automobiles within the past ten years. In fact, he remembers sleeping on the streets of his Hutong district as a child during the hot summer months – together with the other neighborhood kids – and not having to worry about being hit by a moving vehicle...*because there were none!*

After breakfast I briefly went up to Michael's room and took photos of a nearby Hutong neighborhood from his hotel window, and of the China railway in the distance. The only view I had from *my* room was the other side of the hotel. At 8:00am we boarded the bus and drove the short distance to the Temple of Heaven, the first of two World Heritage sites we would visit on our last day in Beijing.

The Temple of Heaven is a complex of Taoists buildings built in the southeastern part of central Beijing between 1406 and 1420, during the reign of the Yongle Emperor, the same ruler responsible for building the Forbidden City. But the area was extended and officially called the Temple of Heaven during the reign of Jiajing Emperor in the 16th Century. Emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties used the complex to perform annual

ceremonies of prayer, hoping to induce a good harvest. And although it is regarded as a Taoist temple, the act of Chinese Heaven worship, especially by a reigning monarch, actually predates Taoism.

The building complex has a unique shape; it is round in the north, and square in the south, embodying the ancient concept of Heaven as being round-shaped and earth as being square-shaped. The Temple grounds are surrounded by almost 3 kilometers of parkland. Each of the three main temples were constructed along strict philosophical lines. *The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests* is a beautiful triple-gabled round building built on three levels of marble stone base. Although the temple is made of wood, not a single nail was used in its construction. Every piece was wedged into place. Amazing. This particular temple was used by the Emperor to pray for good harvests. *The Imperial Vault of Heaven* just to the south is a single-gabled circular building built on a single level of marble stone base. This temple is enclosed by a barrier known as the *Echo Wall*, which can transmit sound around the entire structure. Although, with the high level of crowd noise it was difficult to hear the echo. Walking further south is the *Circular Mound Altar*, an empty circular platform resting on three levels of marble stone decorated with carved dragons. In the center of this altar is a stone slate known as the *Heart of Heaven*, or the *Supreme Yang*, a direct line to Heaven, where the emperor would stand and pray for a good upcoming harvest. This proved to be a great photo-op and people queued up to have their picture taken ‘praying’ on the *Heart of Heaven*.

As beautiful as the building complex was, the real *cultural* experience, I thought, lay in the park grounds surrounding it. Huge crowds of Chinese people were everywhere, and not just visiting and viewing, they were here to *participate*. Everywhere you looked there were groups exercising: tai chi, qi gong, sword dancing, regular dancing and yoga. Anybody could just walk right up and join them. In fact, we participated in a series of tai chi exercises, trying (pathetically, I might add) to keep up with the slow-motion moves of the Tai Chi master leading the group. Bill and Jon and some of the others tried their hand at badminton. I embarrassed myself at sword dancing, which resembled tai chi with a fake sword. Somebody placed a boom box on the ground, and before you knew it a group had gathered to do some dance exercises. Along an open corridor leading into the Temple of Heaven, other groups of Chinese gathered to play mahjong or Chinese chess or cards. In another area, a group of musically inclined elderly men gathered in an impromptu band, playing traditional opera songs on strange-looking

instruments while one of their members sang (or screeched). People were painting on canvasses, or drawing calligraphy with a watery solution on the sidewalk (which evaporated within minutes). In China, women are retired at age fifty, and men at age fifty-five – this is done to accommodate a large generation of younger workers – and many of the people in the park seemed like retired folk enjoying their life.

The Temple of Heaven was such a peaceful and happy place I didn't want to leave. You could actually feel the positive energy. In one area there was a sacred oak tree, hundreds of years old, and bands of people would encircle it and raise their hands in prayer, trying to channel some good Karma. It was contagious, this incredibly positive mood, and everybody was so friendly. And what a gorgeous day it was, too. Absolutely perfect. I felt like I was one with the universe here.

Our next stop was the Summer Palace situated just northwest of Beijing's center, in the Haidian District. The Summer Palace is another historical site that doubles as a recreational park. On this day there were numerous school buses parked in the lot outside the East Palace Gate, and when we entered the grounds it seemed as if the entire Beijing elementary school system had been let loose inside! Under normal circumstances, the idea of thousands of screaming, running school kids would have dampened my desire to sightsee, but it was simply amazing watching so many Chinese children in one spot. We took many photos of them; they were so adorable.

The Summer Palace has two predominant features, *Longevity Hill* (60 meters high), and *Kunming Lake*. Both are man-made. The dirt that was dug to make the lake (from an existing smaller body of water) was used to create the hill. The original Summer Palace complex was first started in 1750, during the reign of Qianlong Emperor (Qing Dynasty) and designed as a summer getaway; the cool breezes and natural landscape tempering Beijing's notoriously hot summers. Artisans were brought in to re-create the natural beauty of China since it was difficult for the emperor to travel around the countryside. Although we did not enter *Longevity Hill*, the front section houses splendid halls and pavilions, such as the Cloud-Dispelling Hall, the Temple of Buddhist Virtue and the Sea of Wisdom Temple. In contrast, the back portion of the hill is quiet with natural beauty and fascinating gardens. The court area, upon entering the East Palace Gate, was where the emperor would receive visitors and conduct affairs of state (the Hall of Benevolence

and Longevity), this section also included several palaces where various emperors lived while at the summer complex.

We made our way slowly along the *Long Corridor*, a roofed walkway designed to shield the emperor from the sun, which extends throughout much of the complex. The ceiling and upper edges of the *Long Corridor* had individual paintings of Imperial Chinese life; no two sections were the same. To our left were the calm waters of Kunming Lake, dotted with paddleboats and small launches. Along the bank of the lake was the Bronze Ox statue, an imposing monument, and further back we came upon the Marble Boat statue resting in the water. We boarded one of the Dragon boats (a motorized launch with a Dragon's head on its bow) and crossed the lake back to the entrance of the Summer Palace. I can see why the emperors would have enjoyed coming here. Even with huge crowds jamming into every corner of the complex, the place exuded a peaceful resonance. And the fact that the monarch had this entire place to himself would have made it feel like a fabled garden in Heaven.

Afterwards we ate lunch at a local restaurant seldom frequented by other tourists, on a Beijing side street. It was decorated with Chinese opera-style lanterns and traditional lacquer furniture, with images and photos of early 20th Century Beijing gracing the walls. After eating, we were given time to wander along the back of the restaurant which served as a museum of sorts, with private back rooms decorated in old Chinese tradition, and more interesting photographs of a bygone era. There were also fascinating family portraits in one hallway, which depicted women with tiny feet, the result of binding. As we left the restaurant, the maitre 'd entertained us by spinning a big bamboo top on a string...a sight I would have enjoyed more if it weren't for the loud cracks of thunder right above us!

It was time to say goodbye to Beijing. Our three-day stay here had taken us to numerous sites listed on the World Heritage List, and while there was still so much more to see and experience, I felt we received a very representative look at both the ancient and modern culture of the capital. We drove for about an hour (through traffic) to the massive Beijing International Airport, with its tortoise-shaped roof design. Lisa helped facilitate our way through the local boarding process, making sure to secure for us seating assignments to our liking, and then we waited in a lower level gate area for our flight's departure.

Our plane was delayed for more than an hour. Lisa joked that in China, if a delay was only thirty minutes long, it is considered 'on time'. When we had to board, we took an escalator to another lower level and then experienced a cultural aspect of our trip that we did not enjoy: *pushing and shoving*! In Chinese society, perhaps due to the size of its population, pushing, shoving and cutting in line is not seen as rude. Although, when a foreigner first experiences this it is quite a shock. We had lined up patiently to board a shuttle bus to take us to our awaiting plane, but when the vehicle pulled up to the terminal the Chinese passengers behind us rushed forward in a wild stampede to get on the bus. I mean, we were literally pushed to the side even though we were first in line. We encountered this behavior numerous times throughout our journey, especially in over-crowded areas, and it took some getting used to.

The flight to Xian in central China was quite comfortable. We were on an Airbus and the seats were wider, with more legroom than the international flight. The only exception was the 'meal' they served. I ate a Beijing Burger, a soggy piece of mystery meat wrapped in an unusually flavored bun. As far as I could tell, only Bill and I actually managed to scarf it down.

It was nighttime when we touched down in Xian. Getting off the plane was like stepping into an ashtray, the cigarette smoke was so thick in the terminal building there was literally a smoky haze suspended above us. And we inhaled quite a bit of this stuff since our group's luggage was the last off the plane. Later, we were met outside the baggage claim area by Liu (pronounced Leo), our local guide in Xian. Liu was a thin, balding man in his early forties who wore a thick set of eyeglasses. He informed us we needed to take a 'short walk' to our awaiting tour bus, which was parked in a lot far from the terminal building, and then led us on what I jokingly referred to as the shorter version of Mao's Long March. The tour bus was much smaller than the one we had in Beijing, the legroom was tight (for me, anyway) and the air-conditioning was turned off. Not that it was exceptionally hot, mind you, but having just made the trek from the terminal building with our baggage in tow, many of us were already sweating. To make matters worse, Liu did not have what most folks consider a 'winning personality'. Granted, some of this was cultural. He spoke perfect English, but in a slow, almost cadence style, which could lull you to sleep. And for some reason, he launched into a story about his name that was a bit perturbing. He went on about how his American college professor suggested he adopt an English name (seeing as how he would be dealing with many

Western tourists), but Liu was opposed to the idea of taking an American-sounding name, and the way he said it sounded as if it repulsed him, hence the awkwardness we felt at his story. Eventually, his professor suggested he use 'Leo', which sounds almost like Liu. I guess Liu thought this was an amusing tale. But, in all honesty, he said it with all the warmth of a prison camp warden addressing his new detainees.

I was so tired I fell asleep on the hour-long bus trip from the airport into Xian. We headed straight to a local restaurant for dinner. I was so groggy I thought we were at our hotel and got off the bus carrying my shoulder bags. How embarrassing! We were seated in a private dining room. Xian is the wheat-producing region of China, so we experienced more noodle dishes here than in Beijing, including some delicious soups. Afterwards, we drove to our hotel, the Xian Grand Noble Hotel, situated within the walls of Xian's inner city. It was Friday night and festive crowds of young people filled the streets. This was Lisa's hometown, a metropolis of over 8 million people. Ironically, she called it a 'small town'. The hotel was not as nice as the Marriott in Beijing, but it was comfortable nonetheless. I was so exhausted from the day's activities and lingering jet lag that I went straight to bed.

Day Six

Xian is a fascinating city, with a history dating back 3,100 years. Located in the central northwest province of Shaanxi, this city is considered one of the Four Great Ancient Capitals of China, having served as the cultural and political center for some of the greatest dynasties in Chinese history: the Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui and Tang dynasties. Paper was supposedly invented here, and the area also served as the eastern terminus of the old Silk Road, a commercial trade hub with contacts to civilizations in the west. During the Tang Dynasty, Xian flourished as the cultural arts center of China. After the fall of the Tang Dynasty the city was devastated and slowly abandoned, becoming much smaller in size. In 1370, during the Ming Dynasty, a new defensive wall was built encircling the old city, which still stands today; this wall separates the 'inner city' from the larger metropolis that has sprung up outside the wall parameters. Because the city is so far inland it served as a refuge from the Japanese army during WWII, surviving much of the

bombings that ravaged the rest of China. After 1949 the national government tried to balance the development of different regions in China, and many factories and universities from other cities were transferred to Xian. Since the 1990's, the economic revival of the country's interior has made Xian an important cultural, industrial and educational center, containing many research facilities in development, national security and China's emerging space program.

After a so-so breakfast buffet at our hotel, we boarded the tour bus and embarked on an incredible journey of discovery. We drove for about thirty minutes outside the city, heading towards Lintong District, home of the Terracotta Warriors museum. But along the way we made a brief stop just off the highway to visit a traditional *yaodong*, a cave dwelling dug into the side of a mountain. *This was truly a mind-blowing experience.* The provincial government was in the process of tearing down the *yaodongs* in this particular area – and there were several bulldozers doing just that when we arrived – but one woman refused to leave her cave dwelling. Her home was the one we visited. The government, in an effort to modernize the peasantry, has moved these families into newly built housing projects. The typical *yaodong* is shaped like an arched tunnel (its meaning in Chinese), and consists of a main room and possibly some smaller side caves used as sleeping quarters. The outside entrance has a façade designed to give the impression of a normal house. But make no mistake about it, these were cave dwellings.

In this particular province, up to 90 percent of the rural folk in certain areas still live in *yaodongs*, a fact almost too incredible to believe. The woman allowed us to enter her one-room dwelling and take pictures. There was a bed and some other furniture, including a television set. Electrical wiring provided light; a portable stove allowed for cooking. Frankly, it looked dank and not too inviting. A portrait of Chairman Mao hung on the wall. During the 15 years of the Long March, when the communist forces fought the Nationalist Government, Mao and his men lived in *yaodongs* like these. What I found even more incredulous was that this poor woman once shared this cave with her husband, two children and her in-laws!

We continued down the road for a few minutes and arrived at the Xian Daqin Terracotta and Lacquer Furniture Art Factory. Although this may have been described as a 'tourist shop', the terra cotta sculptures and lacquer furniture produced here were top quality. A store guide gave us a brief

lecture on how the terra cotta statues are made; first shaped in clay, then covered in casts and baked in kilns. This process is believed to be the same one used to make the original ancient Terracotta Warriors we would be seeing later. We also saw how traditional Chinese lacquer furniture is made. Afterwards, we were allowed thirty minutes to browse and shop in their beautiful showroom. Billionaire Bill Gates once offered the Chinese government one million dollars for one of the original Terracotta Warriors, when they refused he settled for a replica made at *this* art factory. After hearing this, I thought, *well, if this place was good enough for Bill Gates, then it was good enough for me!* I purchased five (considerably smaller) replicas for about \$50 (which, in hindsight, seems like a lot to pay for clay figurines). I bought The Emperor, The General, The Officer, The Warrior and The Kneeling Archer. They were placed in small boxes which I then had to personally carry with me from airport to airport all the way back to Miami so they wouldn't break. A labor of love. These ancient warriors now 'defend' my souvenir case

From the Daqin Terracotta and Lacquer Furniture Art Factory we proceeded to Lintong District. I was quite excited about visiting the famed Terracotta Warriors, having seen a History Channel program about the site prior to leaving for China. This terracotta army dates back more than 2200 years, to the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, who defeated the "warring states" and unified China under one dynasty in 221 BC. Chinese historians claim that at the age of 13 the young emperor gave instructions for a terracotta army to be sculptured (with no two faces alike) to guard his mausoleum and protect him in the afterlife. His mausoleum was reportedly built beginning in 246 BC, requiring 700,000 workers. An entire man-made necropolis was created for the emperor, including – according to the great Chinese Historian Sima Qian (145-90 BC) – 'palaces, scenic towers, personal officials and servants, his terracotta army, valuable utensils and other 'wonderful objects' with 100 rivers fashioned in mercury'. Whether or not this is true remains to be seen (or excavated, as the case may be), but high readings of mercury have been detected in the valley of the Li Mountain where the mausoleum is located. At one point, the mountain had been mined for both gold and jade, and the tunnels might have been used to create this underground funeral complex. The actual burial mound of Emperor Qin Shi Huang has yet to be opened for fear of damaging its contents. As we got closer to the Terra Cotta Museum, we could see the grassy mound that is the resting place of the emperor. The four excavation

pits, which make up the museum, are situated on the eastern side of his tomb.

On March 29, 1974, a group of local farmers from XiYang Village, in the Lintong District, were digging a series of wells when they came upon some pottery fragments and ancient bronze weapons. This was brought to the attention of the government, which later sent an archeological team from the Shaanxi Province in April of that year to investigate further. What the team discovered was truly astonishing! A total of four pits have been excavated so far. Pit No. 1 is the most impressive, covered now with a huge arched steel dome structure to protect it from the elements. It is 230 meters long, and contains the main 'army' of Emperor Qin Shi Huang. There are 11 corridors, most over 3 meters wide, paved with small bricks and covered, originally, with a wooden ceiling supported by large beams and posts. It is estimated there are more than 8,000 soldiers here, with over 2,000 excavated thus far and fully restored, lined up in columns with war chariots in the back. When we first entered this cavernous chamber and saw the clay warriors in battle-ready formation our jaws dropped in awe. The soldiers were positioned as they would have been 2200 years ago entering a field of battle. While their body armor was similar, each face was different, sculpted from the actual warriors themselves. This is a working excavation site, and as we made our way towards the back area of the pit we could see the tables and tools of the archeologists who were still unearthing and repairing the warriors (many of the soldiers are discovered in fragments). Because it was Saturday, though, we were not able to see them actually digging.

After walking through Pit No. 1 we ate a very delicious buffet lunch at the museum's restaurant. Chefs would spin, pound and shape noodle dough as you watched, making bowl after bowl of soup (which most of us spiced with chili sauce). When lunch was over, we continued our tour of the museum. Pit No. 2, discovered in 1976, contains over a thousand warriors and 90 chariots of wood, arranged in a special military formation. The archers, both kneeling and standing, faced eastward; two areas were composed of chariots; and the northern section is made up exclusively of cavalymen. There are various glass displays here, as well, so you can see the intricate sculpture of the statues up close. The stitching on the clothes and the laces on the shoes are plainly visible and detailed. *Amazing*. Also on display in this pit are samples of the weapons found with the terracotta army: bronze spears, knives and swords. Pit No. 3, also discovered in 1976, was described as a military command center. This pit held 68 figures (some of

officer's rank) with an ornately decorated canopied chariot drawn by four horses. It is presumed to be a command center because of its rearward positioning in relation to the other two pits that make up the bulk of the terracotta army. Pit No. 4 has yielded nothing thus far.

Just south of Pit No. 1 is the Circle Vision Hall where you can view a twenty-minute film about the discovery and restoration of the entire site. We also entered a museum section displaying smaller replicas of the war chariots. It was exceptionally dark in here, and very crowded. Lisa warned us to be leery of pickpockets; she suggested we hold onto our wallets while walking through this area. There were so many people, and so much jostling going on, that I soon abandoned my wallet and held onto my testicles! I felt as if everybody in there was groping me in the dark. I tried to take some photos of the chariots, but the crushing weight of the crowds made me so uncomfortable I ran for the exits, instead.

In the museum gift shop I was able to buy an official Terra Cotta Warrior reference book and get it autographed by Yang Xinman, the only remaining farmer (out of four) who originally discovered the site while digging a well back in 1974. In his late seventies, Yang Xinman has become something of a celebrity in this town...and has developed the temperament of a spoiled rock star. He will pose for a picture with you if you cough up 20 yuans (about \$3), but will not have his picture taken with children (as poor little Rachael would soon discover; he shoed her away like a pesky pigeon). I'm almost ashamed to admit I paid the 'photo bribe' and had my picture taken with this cantankerous farmer. We finished our trip to the museum in a teashop at the back of the facility, sitting around various tables while store employees gave us a demonstration on tea preparation, which included three free samples. They had unusually named teas like Ku Ding Tea, Dragon Well Tea and Da Hong Pao Tea, purportedly curing everything from hypertension to abdominal distension. In the teashop you could purchase the various teas by weight, or buy tea paraphernalia such as pots, cups, special holding trays, etc.

After spending several hours at the Terra Cotta Warriors Museum we boarded our bus and drove back to Xian. We had enough time to shower and change before heading over to the New World Hotel where we had a memorable 16-course dumpling dinner in their second floor restaurant. The meal was unique because each dumpling dish was different, and tasting the various fillings was an 'experience'. There was one scary moment during

dinner when Jon almost choked on his food; at first, we thought he had merely eaten a chili pepper and was reacting to the horrible ‘hot’ sensation, but apparently he had something lodged in his windpipe. Thankfully, he was able to cough it out. The dumplings were delicious, not one was left on the Lazy Susan when we finished.

After dinner, we walked down the hotel corridor to the theater (located on the same floor) where we watched a fascinating Tang Dynasty Show. Beautifully choreographed and costumed, the show was a series of musical and dance performances depicting the Tang Dynasty era, which is considered the Golden Age of Chinese Culture. For the most part, all of the acts were entertaining, including some elaborate dance sequences. But there was one number, a woman playing a strange string instrument, which almost lulled us to sleep (especially after that huge dumpling meal). I was sitting behind Gail – who began nodding off during this number – and I took it upon myself to make certain she didn’t slip out of her seat!

We arrived back at our hotel after 10:00pm. Like most nights, I was thoroughly exhausted and fell asleep quickly.

Day Seven

This morning, we didn’t have to gather in the lobby until 10:00am. We were flying to Guilin later in the afternoon, so I repacked my suitcase before breakfast, depositing it outside my door for the bellhop to collect. I met Marcel, Christiane and Michael for breakfast, and then we took advantage of the rest of the morning to do a little sightseeing through Xian’s ‘inner city’. Leaving our hotel, we turned left onto East Road and followed that to the East Gate of the ancient city wall. Most of the businesses were still closed at this hour, but there were shopkeepers and city employees already sweeping the sidewalks and streets. Everywhere we visited in China, the streets were very clean, something that surprised me considering the size of the population. As we crossed Jiefang Road, a major intersection, traffic began to pick up, and walking through the East Gate a block further we spotted an

open-air food market already teeming with people along the inner side of the city wall.

Like at the Temple of Heaven, we encountered large groups of people exercising in the beautiful park areas just outside the wall. A picturesque man-made moat surrounds the entire ancient city of Xian, and we followed this along the edge of the wall and re-entered the inner city via the Yanta Road gate entrance, crossing narrow tree-lined streets filling rapidly with early morning commuters. Although we ended up back on East Road, we momentarily lost our bearings and had to ask someone for directions back to the hotel, showing them a small folded map I took from my hotel room. Even though I am a mailman, I have no sense of direction! Confident we knew where we were, we decided to explore a little further, and proceeded to the very center of the ancient city, which is characterized by the Bell Tower, a stately traditional building. The majestic wooden tower is the largest (118 feet) and best preserved of its kind in all of China, its size denoting the historical importance of Xian as an ancient capital. It stands on a brick base almost 30 feet tall and 116 feet wide, in the middle of a major intersection. The four main roads extending from the tower connect to the East, South, West and North Gates. To access the tower you have to cross the street using a pedestrian subway.

We hustled back to the Grand Noble Hotel just before 10:00am, meeting up with the rest of the tour group. Our first stop that morning was at the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, in front of Yanna Road, in the southern suburb of Xian City. Built around 652 A.D. – in the Da Ci'en Temple Complex – under the Tang Emperor Gaozong, the pagoda's function was to collect the Buddhist materials that were brought back from India by the great Chinese monk, Xuanzang. Traveling along the Silk Road for more than 17 years, Xuanzang visited India and obtained Buddha figures, 657 kinds of sutra (scriptures of the oral teachings of Buddha) and numerous Buddha relics. As the first abbot of the Da Ci'en Temple, Xuanzang oversaw the construction of the pagoda, and invited religious scholars into the temple to translate the Sanskrit sutras into Chinese, which allowed Buddhism to spread more quickly throughout China. His book, "Pilgrimage to the West", a memoir of his journey to India, is considered one of the greatest writings of the Tang Dynasty era.

The pagoda, which was originally five stories tall and made of rammed earth with a stone exterior, collapsed after five decades, and was rebuilt in

704 A.D. under the reign of Empress Wu Zetian who added five additional floors. In 1556, a massive earthquake reduced the building to its current seven stories. The structure that stands there today was later renovated and strengthened under the Ming Dynasty. The reason it is named the Big Wild Goose Pagoda is steeped in legend; several monks at the site were lamenting over the fact they had no meat to feast on, hoping the merciful Bodhisattva would provide them some. Just then, a big wild goose flying overhead broke its wing and fell at their feet, which shamed them into being more pious and shun meat altogether.

Just before entering the Da Ci'en Temple Complex is a statue of the monk Xuanzang. There are statues of lions standing guard at the temple gates, and just as you enter the complex you cross two structures: the Bell Tower on the east, and the Drum Tower on the west. The Bell Tower contains an enormous iron bell, weighing 15 tons, molded during the Ming Dynasty. Walking straight along the central axis you come upon the *Hall of Mahavira*, with three carved statues of Sakyamuni (one of the many names of the spiritual teacher who founded Buddhism, and is considered the Supreme Buddha), and the *Sermon Hall* where the disciples listened to sermons, which includes a bronze statue of Amitabha (a celestial Buddha). There was a large continuously burning pit where you could place a small piece of incense as an offering to the spirits. I nearly singed my hand inserting the incense in the pit. Behind these buildings stands the 7th century cone-shaped Big Wild Goose Pagoda, empty now except for a spiral staircase that can take you to the top for a panoramic view of Xian. To the north of the pagoda is the *Hall of Xuanzang Sanzang*, with a bronze statue of the sitting monk, and chiseled murals along the wall depicting his life.

In the gift shop I browsed the numerous stalls and display cases filled with wonderfully drawn and painted artwork, much of it done on silk canvas. I purchased a small painting of a winter mountain scene and was given a free calligraphy drawing of my daughter's name as a bonus. The salesgirl originally quoted a price of \$40 for the painting, but Lisa told me to offer \$25 and stick to that price regardless of the sales pressure. I finally conceded to pay \$28 after I discovered a monk did the painting, and because the idea of bargaining any further couldn't possibly be any good for me, karma-wise. I must say, I am not a particularly superstitious person by nature, but after spending two weeks in China it is impossible to leave without a little more awareness of 'good luck' symbology; and whether you call it Feng Shui or rabbit foot hocus-pocus, I found myself buying

drawings, jade pieces, or small figurines all because they supposedly generate positive energy or good luck. Yeah, I'm a typical tourist; I'll believe anything *once!*

We then drove to the Muslim Quarter of Xian, located in one of the oldest sections of the inner city. The Silk Road extended from Xian all the way to Constantinople, and many foreign traders along the way settled in Xian from Muslim countries. Eventually, these foreigners congregated in a section of the old city, marrying local Chinese women, creating a Muslim community in Xian whose descendants' number around 80,000 people today. The Great Mosque was built around 742 A.D. during the Tang Dynasty, and was subsequently restored and widened under other dynasties. Today, the Chinese government spends money every year to maintain this historic temple.

Unlike any mosque I've ever seen, it is actually a temple complex shaped like a large rectangle, from east to west, and enclosed by a high wall containing numerous gates, four courtyards, several pavilions, an Introspection Tower (that serves as the minaret), all leading to a hall of worship (the mosque) in the back of the complex. The 8th century mosque has huge eaves and brackets, its roof is covered in blue glazed tiles and the ceilings are carved with over 600 classical scriptures, in which all the letters are shaped in colorful decorative grass and flower patterns. Around the hall of worship, the pages of the Koran are carved into 600 pieces of wooden boards, 30 of them in Chinese, the rest in Arabic. An amazing feature of this complex is the quiet serenity you feel standing in any of its courtyards, which is unusual considering that just beyond the walls of the Great Mosque lies the market place of the Muslim Quarter, a noisy, bustling maze of vendors and stalls.

We followed Liu through the different sections of the Great Mosque while he enlightened us on its history. We discovered that Liu, who is not a Muslim, grew up in the Muslim Quarter. His tales about being an 'outsider' in his own neighborhood, and marrying into a Muslim family, and his own current ordeal with a daughter who is engaged to marry a man he does not particularly approve of, finally endeared me to him. Despite our original perceptions of him, he was, after all, just a family man with everyday concerns. As Liu launched into another lecture at one of the pavilions, I took the opportunity to walk around the Great Mosque with Marcel and take pictures. Later, Vickie and I slipped away to shop in the marketplace just

outside the mosque walls. Lisa warned us not to venture too far into the maze of stalls lest we forget how to get back out to the street where our bus was located. She also warned us to watch our valuables while in the Muslim Quarter.

I needed to buy a backpack for my growing pile of souvenirs and became temporarily distracted negotiating with a vendor, losing sight of Vickie in the process. I went back and forth on the price, but the vendor wanted \$25 for his backpacks and I wasn't willing to pay that much (not in China, anyway), so I re-entered the alleyway looking for Vickie... *but she was no place to be found*. I momentarily panicked, because there was a mass of people clogging my path, and visions of Vickie being secretly sold in some alleyway popped into my head. I walked deeper into the market place, hastening my steps until I finally saw her shopping for some trinkets. *Whew!* I was already rehearsing the story I was going to tell her husband Jim if I couldn't locate her. We made our way back to the entrance of the market place, stopping at the backpack stall once again where the vendor finally agreed to accept \$18 for a Diesel-brand bag that was made – ironically enough – in the U.S.A. Vickie ended up buying a book on Chinese calligraphy for \$7 because Steve had paid \$30 for the same book at the pagoda gift shop earlier that morning and she wanted to rub it in!

We only had about ten minutes to get back to the bus, but when we reached the main street Vicky and I became enthralled with the Muslim Food Market, which is a wide street packed with produce merchants, grocery shops, restaurants and hot food carts. I remember telling Vicky that we should be heading back to the bus before Dragon Mom comes looking for us, and no sooner than I said it, Lisa appeared miraculously on the street in front of us! We both laughed hysterically. Lisa was kind enough to give us an additional fifteen minutes to venture into the food market. Later, the group had lunch at one of Lisa's favorite restaurants in Xian, the Din Din Xiang (featuring paper thin crepes) before heading out to the airport.

The only nice thing about Xian Airport was that Lisa managed to have our luggage checked and our boarding passes ready when we arrived. Our flight to Guilin, on the other hand, was delayed *twice*. We finally took off at 8:15pm on what proved to be a very scary, turbulent-filled flight. I was able to change my seat and sit in the front row by myself once the flight commenced, relishing the extra room. But my happiness was short-lived, for I was directly facing one of the screen monitors and they were showing a

National Geographic show about the creation of the Universe, with Big Bang explosions on the screen coinciding with the plane's violent turbulent-induced shaking. *I was terrified*, thinking that at any moment our plane was going to explode!

When we arrived in Guilin (after 10:00pm) I was able to watch Lisa's Dragon Lady 'transformation' in person. Gail's luggage had been damaged (one of the locks had been ripped off and the zipper latch was broken) and as I wheeled my own suitcase past the custom's office, I witnessed Lisa tearing the airport official a 'new one' in Chinese. Later, China Air sent Gail a new piece of luggage at the hotel.

After retrieving our bags, we met Sue – our local guide – who led us to our awaiting bus. Thank goodness we had already eaten dinner on the flight down, because the bus ride to the Sheraton Hotel in Guilin took a good hour or so, and by the time we checked in we were all thoroughly exhausted. I managed to watch a little CNN in my hotel room before falling asleep. One of the things I found most interesting on our trip so far was the absence of police or military personnel. Being a communist country, and with so much unrest going on in the Middle East, I thought the government security apparatus would be on full display throughout our visit. I was surprised they even allowed the television coverage of the uprisings in Syria, Libya and Yemen. And to be honest, outside of Tiananmen Square, I don't recall seeing any police or military presence at all beyond the occasional highway trooper. But as I watched CNN that night the newscaster announced, during one of the segments, "*And in Shanghai today, 24 protestors were arrested...*" suddenly, the TV screen went blank and stayed that way for about three minutes. When CNN came back on the air the news clip concerning the 'Shanghai protests' was over, and this little act of government censorship fully reminded me of where I was. By the way, the protests in Shanghai were harmless, some taxi and truck drivers complaining about mounting fuel costs, but apparently the Chinese government did not want to broadcast any type of civil unrest during the tense atmosphere of the Arab Spring, no matter how trivial.

Day Eight

Our Sheraton Hotel was situated just half a block from the picturesque banks of the Li River, and surrounded by the most magnificent limestone mountains I have ever seen, covered almost perpetually (or so it seemed) by a white foggy mist. The city of Guilin is located in the northeast section of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, which borders Vietnam, in southern China. The province is a popular tourist location due to the natural landscape, perhaps the most beautiful in all of China. What makes the landscape so stunning, beyond the clear meandering waterways and verdant vegetation ranging from bamboo trees to conifers, are the strange formation of karsts hills or mountains, which appear to jut almost straight up into the air all over the region. This scenery inspires most of the Chinese traditional art depicting natural landscape. Throughout our three-day stay in the Guilin area I never tired of the view. It was breathtaking.

I ate breakfast with Gerry and Patricia on the second floor buffet court, overlooking the enormous lobby. Most of our hotels were top notch. But this one was exceptionally nice. *Although*, there was one distinct feature in all of my hotel rooms I found peculiar; next to our beds was a glass wall that looked directly into the bathroom. I wondered if this was a deliberate Asian design and asked the other tour members about it. I mean, there was a screen, or blind, which one could pull down for privacy, but the thought of someone watching you as you entered the bathroom seemed odd... *and a bit creepy*.

We gathered at 8:30am in the lobby. The highlight of today's tour was another "OMG!" moment for us: the Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces. Just before we embarked on our two and a half hour bus ride to Long Sheng, Jim and I rushed upstairs to the buffet court for some free containers of coffee-to-go. I would later regret this, having consumed several cups of java already that morning. *None of our tour buses had bathroom facilities!* As we made our way out of the city of Guilin and into the countryside, we couldn't stop photographing the beautiful karsts hills, sloping farmlands and rivers. This was one scenic place. During the bus ride, Sue, our local guide, gave us a brief lesson on Guilin, telling us the city has a rich cultural history dating back more than 2000 years. It seems this region has enchanted scholars and poets since it was first founded, producing many works of art and literature attesting to its beauty. The main manufacturing industries that support the

city, beyond the tourism trade, are rubber, medicine, electronics, machinery, light industry and fine arts. The city flower is osmanthus, and when it blooms in autumn it fills the air with its sweet fragrance. In fact, the name Guilin literally means 'forests of osmanthus'. There are three specialty items famous in these parts: fermented bean curd, chili sauce and Sanhua liquor. Throughout our stay here Lisa kept handing out crispy candies on the bus, another local specialty.

On the way to Long Sheng, Dolores developed an 'intestinal situation' which necessitated our pulling over on the side of the road so she could use one of two outhouses standing -- *almost miraculously* -- in the middle of nowhere, overlooking the mountains. The cups of coffee I'd consumed earlier had finally taken their toll, as well, and I got off the bus to use the other outhouse. Luckily, I just needed to pee, because the rectangular hole in the middle of the outhouse floor was stuffed with enough fecal matter to probably fertilize the entire Guangxi valley below us. I held my breath the whole time I used the 'facility', and walked back to the bus pitying poor Dolores.

The area known as the Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces is actually a vast region of rice fields located approximately 27 kilometers southeast of Long Sheng County, which stretches layer upon layer across the base of the Longji Mountain all the way up to its summit, more than 3600 feet high. Longji is Chinese for the 'dragon's backbone'. It is called this because the appearance of the rice terraces, as seen from the top of the mountain, resembles the spine of a giant dragon. In the spring, water irrigates the terraces, making them appear like great ribbons hanging off the side of the mountain, in the summer the fields are lushly green, then turn golden in the fall with ripened millet. White snow blankets the terraces in the winter. Either way, they're beautiful to look at in any season. Dating back to the Yuan Dynasty, the Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces have been sculpted into the mountainside over the centuries primarily by two groups of minority peoples, the Zhuangs, who make up the main population in the region, and the Yao ethnic minority.

Sue explained the exploding popularity of this site, telling us that an American photographer visited the region some years ago and took really nice pictures for a magazine back home. When his photographs were first published there was an immediate interest by travelers to see this landscape for themselves, and the ensuing tourism boom has been a godsend for the

local minority population. *But getting there was no easy task.* We drove for more than two hours, arriving at a bus stop halfway up the Longji Mountain. The parking lot was filled with Yao women vendors, their hair piled high atop their heads in traditional fashion. We then had to board a smaller shuttle bus for the hair-raising ride up the much narrower mountain road to the entrance of the Ping'an Zhuang Village, which is nestled along the side of the mountain. From here, we had to climb a series of stone steps all the way to the top (a hike of about an hour with rest stops along the way), passing wooden village homes and businesses, some built more than a hundred years old.

The houses here are built along the hillside, on thick wooden stilts. Some eighty or so Zhuang families live in this village. The wood structures are usually two or three levels high, with the ground floor used for livestock and domestic animals (like horses or pigs) and the families living in the upper levels. The smell of manure is quite strong on the ground floor and one can only imagine how these people manage to live right above it. They do seem to take pride in their animals, though. We actually visited the home of an eighty-year-old Zhuang woman who was busy chopping veggies for her pigs below when we arrived. Her second floor living quarter, although a fairly spacious room, did not have much natural light filtering through it. There was a loft above the living room, which I assumed was the sleeping area.

At the entrance gate of the village – prior to ascending the stone steps – visitors can hire local men (for 250 to 300 yuans, the equivalent of about \$40-\$50) to carry you up the mountain in a seated carriage. Quynh, who was very nicely dressed and didn't seem like she wanted to sweat very much, took this option. Frankly, I pitied the two guys who carried her up; it must have been a daunting task, indeed, from the struggling looks on their faces, and not because of Quynh's weight but rather the incline. They made a few pit stops along the way, stopping every so often to catch their breath. For those of us who actually trekked up the stone pathway, we also made a few stops at different intervals, admiring the vendors' wares as we climbed. There were some unusual food items on sale, like snakes, frogs, eels, and even a bag of dried black ants (which are sold by the kilo, and used – I think – as some kind of sweetener). We saw vendors chopping up red chili peppers (a very common spice in the local cuisine in these parts) and other vendors cooking bamboo rice on open grills. Bamboo rice is a staple for these mountain people; it is prepared by stuffing a hollow bamboo tube with sticky rice, peanuts, tara root, sweet potato, beans, mushrooms or other crops

and then roasting it over a grill. We ate some during lunch, and it was very tasty.

At the top of the mountain were three red Chinese flags, which became our beacon as we continued up the stone pathway. Bill and Wendy stopped short of the summit, opting to sit in the restaurant where we would take our lunch. Bill had been suffering some pain throughout the tour as a result of a herniated disc. I don't know how he managed to climb as far as he did. But to make up for it, I think he and Wendy shared three large bottles of beer while the rest of us went ahead to the top. Later, when we joined them for lunch, *he didn't seem like he was in too much pain!* We took some fantastic photos from the summit; the view of all those rice terraces and mountain homes below us was simply awesome. Afterwards, we had lunch in the restaurant overlooking the valley. Considering the elevation, and the difficulty it would be to bring supplies up here, I was surprised at the quality of the food. There was fresh seafood, bamboo rice, and nicely cooked vegetables. Even the soda and beer were ice cold.

Going down the mountain path was not difficult, but more intense. Jim warned me about this. I found myself tightening up, having to halt my forward progress more. (One false step and off the side of the mountain you went!) On the way down we visited the eighty-year-old Zhuang woman I mentioned earlier. When we reached our shuttle bus I sat on the side of the bus facing the mountain valley so I could take more pictures of the view... *and regretted it immediately.* The driver zipped along that narrow road, hugging the edge of the precipice; negotiating those sharp turns with such abandon I nearly regurgitated my lunch! Once we were back on our regular tour bus I must have napped all the way to Guilin. It had been an exhausting day!

We had just enough time to shower and change for dinner when we arrived at the Sheraton. That evening, we were treated to a real feast, and not just the palatable kind, either. We ate at this place called the Long Zhe Tea House where the food was as nice to look at as it was to eat! The egg and bok choy soup was presented like a Taoist symbol, the fried fish sticks were arranged like a, um, well, *fish*, individual servings of eggplant were placed in pink doilies, the kung pao chicken was shaped like a city, with a little carrot pagoda, there were interesting rice noodle cakes filled with corn, carrots and beans, dumplings arranged in the shape of a motor boat. You could tell we were tourists because we kept photographing each dish as it

arrived at our table. By now I was starting to get the hang of the chopsticks and could actually pick something off the Lazy Susan without it rolling across the table. But when I was really hungry I immediately requested a fork; it was survival of the fittest (or nimblest) at these Chinese restaurants, and if you didn't act quickly, that spinning Lazy Susan would leave you in the dust!

After a satisfying dinner most of us followed Sue across the street from the Sheraton to a massage parlor. I know what most of you are thinking, an Asian massage parlor...*happy endings, right?* Well, this was a legitimate massage place. All of the masseuses are government trained. There were two types of massages available: the foot massage, or the body massage. Neither one entailed removing your clothes (although, you did have to take off your shoes and socks for the foot massage). We split up into two groups, depending on what kind of massage you selected. I opted for the foot rub, and entered a room in the underground level of the establishment together with Michael, Gail, Rachael and Dolores. We each sat in very comfortable leather chairs with ottomans that extended our legs out. The masseuses were all young, probably in their twenties. The women got male masseuses; the men got female ones. Once you removed your shoes and socks your feet were soaked in a very warm solution for about five minutes. Then the massage would begin, one foot at a time. It was simply Heaven! They worked your plantar fasciitis muscle, the ankles, the toes, the calves...I found myself drifting off to sleep at one point. Every now and then I would hear 13-year-old Rachael giggle whenever her masseuse pulled her toes.

When it was over, we were all loose as a goose. We were instructed to tip the masseuses twenty yuans. Back at the hotel, Marcel and I decided to take a walk around the streets of Guilin. The town was lit up like a Christmas tree. We headed west and made a right onto the Zhengyang Road Pedestrian Street, an outdoors shopping mall closed off to major traffic. It must have been ten in the evening, but you wouldn't guess it by the amount of young people milling about. We checked several electronic stores for a memory card for Marcel's camera. We then followed the crowds onto East Jiefang Road, heading down to the Li River banks, and slowly walked back towards the Sheraton, browsing in shops and watching food vendors ply their trade on the streets. Guilin is a small town by Chinese standards, despite its population of over 700,000, but it is an exciting place, with a modernized downtown area surrounded by scenes of unprecedented natural beauty. It seemed like an ideal place to live, really.

When I got back to my hotel room I fell asleep immediately. The combination of a solid day of sightseeing and a wonderful foot massage had taken its toll...

Day Nine

Today was another fun-filled busy day for us. I repacked my suitcase, rotating my dirty laundry to the bottom and throwing away some of my older T-shirts, underwear and socks (and one cheesy-looking Western-style dress shirt I decided not to wear) in order to make room for my souvenirs. I learned this trick from Jim, who told me he always traveled with his rattiest clothes (worn or mismatched socks, old underwear and T-Shirts, etc); this way, he'd simply discard them as the trip unfolded, making his suitcase much lighter by the end of the journey. The way the airlines charge for excess baggage nowadays makes this idea a very practical one, and I will definitely incorporate it on all my future tours. Besides, I have a closet full of worn and ratty clothes! When I was done repacking, I placed the suitcase in the corridor and went downstairs for another delicious breakfast.

By nine o'clock we were on the bus and took another scenic drive to the Mopan Hill Wharf where we boarded a riverboat for what would be a four hour westward cruise on the Li (or Lijang) River to the enchanting little town of Yangshuo, where we would be spending the evening. The riverboats, or ferries, were docked side-by-side, and left the pier around the same time (roughly 10:00am), forming a loose flotilla. Our ferry was second in line; although at one point our industrious captain passed the lead boat and took 'command' of the river way. The riverboat had three tiers; the first two consisted of enclosed dining rooms, with a buffet layout on the second floor. The upper deck was an open platform with guardrails (and signs posted on them like: *Do Not Proceed Across The Rail*). From this vantage point we got a spectacular view of the Li River and surrounding karsts mountains and scenery. And believe me, it was all stunning!

The Li River originates from the Cat Mountain in Xing'an County in the north of Guilin, and flows 437 kilometers into the West River. Between

Guilin and Yangshuo – the section we would be navigating – the river seems to unfold like a ‘jade ribbon winding among thousands of grotesque peaks’ (Internet quote). We passed rocky outcrops such as Bat Hill, which resembled a large open-winged bat, the wide entrance to the Crown Cave, the beautiful karsts hills and crags of Yangdi and Liangshi, the mountain face known as the Painted Hill of Nine Horses (where you can see the outline of nine horse-shaped symbols), the Five Fingers Hill (which is famous for being represented on the back of the 20 yuan note), the River Snail Hill, a rock formation shaped like an enormous spiral shell. We passed several towns along the way, including a Muslim fishing village. And while the river appeared like the color of jade, the water itself was very clear and quite shallow in most parts. We saw houseboats, bamboo fishing rafts and smaller makeshift crafts plying the waterway.

At the beginning of the cruise, vendors would pull up alongside the riverboat in what appeared to be motorized canoes, either trying to sell souvenirs to the tourists (they would throw the items onto the ferries for closer inspection) or sell fresh seafood and vegetables to the kitchen chefs working in the open galleys at the back of the riverboats. There was one section of the river where numerous water buffaloes were bathing. Along the banks of another section was a trail for foreign hikers. I must have taken more than two hundred photographs in the span of an hour; but as our boat slowly made its way up the meandering river, surrounded by those mist-covered karsts hills, we began to tire from standing on the upper deck and made our way downstairs to the second floor buffet area (which was actually reserved for our group) and enjoyed the view while sitting down in some air-conditioning. The buffet lunch was good, the food all prepared fresh in the galley, but the highlight was the delicious cream cake Lisa surprised us with to help celebrate Christiane’s 53rd birthday. It was the best dessert I had while in China, and I am not ashamed to say I asked for seconds!

We arrived in Yangshuo shortly after 2:00pm. There were two elderly Chinese fishermen standing on the pier balancing a long rod across their backs. A cormorant – a dark-colored water bird with a long neck and hooked bill, used by the locals to fish – was perched on the ends of each rod. It was an unusual sight, and for five yuans they would allow you to take a photograph with them. Several of us ‘took the bait’, if you will. We proceeded through an arched entranceway into the town’s bustling marketplace; several sections of the stone archway had been etched and dated, signifying various flood levels. Apparently, the monsoon season

causes the Li River to expand dramatically, for there were flood-mark etchings that clearly indicated the marketplace had been inundated during previous storms.

Yangshuo is the seat of Yangshuo County, situated in the northeastern part of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (or Province). It borders the Li River on one side, with a small plain nestled between a number of karsts peaks on the other. Two main roads leading from the water make up the central part of Yangshuo Town: Chinese Street (Die Cui Lu) and West Street (Xi Jie). The marketplace area, which primarily consists of West Street and the pedestrian-only Xian Qian Street, has many foreign-orientated businesses such as hostels, hotels, rock-climbing companies, restaurants, bars and other entertainment venues. There are a growing number of foreigners who live in Yangshuo and own businesses here catering exclusively to tourists. Due to the surrounding karsts peaks, rock climbing and nature trails have become a major tourism industry here since the 1990's, attracting backpackers and climbers alike. The quaint little town reminded me of similar mountain townships across the American west, and while it still retains its traditional Chinese character, much of its ethnic 'flavor' is slowly being supplanted by the tourism industry. Foreigners can come here and pay a fee to 'experience' the culture; watch fishermen fishing with cormorants, or take photographs of local women clad in ethnic dresses, or take classes on calligraphy, tea making or Chinese cooking.

We boarded a hotel shuttle bus (a refurbished golf cart) on Pantao Road in front of the local post office and were taken to the New West Street Hotel, where we would spend the evening. The online reviews about this hotel were not favorable, but, in all honesty, I thought it was beautiful. We entered an enormous marble lobby, artfully decorated in Chinese, with a huge staircase and chandelier. I was not particularly fond of their breakfast buffet, but other than that, the New West Street Hotel was a very pleasant stop, and the view from my window of the main street and adjacent karsts hills was spectacular.

A group of us wanted to rent bicycles and tour the countryside. I went up to my room to put my things away and then returned to the lobby and met Sue, who had secured our new touring bikes (for a fee of 20 yuans) from a local rental place. The only other tour members there were Wendy and Sharon (their husbands opting to stay in the hotel bar). I wanted to wait for Marcel and Christiane, but the ladies were eager to get going, and I decided the chivalric thing to do was to accompany them. Sue instructed us to go

about halfway down the main street and then turn left onto a rural paved road. From there it was a relatively straight ride through the surrounding countryside.

I am a mailman. I walk approximately three and a half hours continuously each day on my route, and then climb in-and-out of my postal vehicle for another three hours or so doing curbside deliveries. I consider myself in relatively good shape, cardio-wise. Ha! I was panting and heaving trying to keep up with Wendy and Sharon. These ladies, who are probably in their sixties (and both look *very* good for their ages, I might add), were hauling ass down this country road. At one point I felt like I was in the Tour de France...*sans the performance-enhancing steroids!* I think Wendy told me that she and her husband went to the gym every day back home. Well, she must have put quite a few miles on the ole exercise bike because she was pedaling like a seasoned cyclist. Along the way, to slow down the momentum, I suggested we stop for some photographs. The scenery was splendid. We basically had the road to ourselves save for the occasional truck or tourist bus. We crossed rice fields, with farmers coaxing their water buffaloes, and women tending to their children, and small villages or isolated homes at the foot of looming karsts hills. Later, when Wendy and Sharon decided to return to the hotel, I met up with Marcel and Christiane and we continued down this road, passing a river on one side (I'm not sure if it was the Li River or a tributary), until it ended in a cluster of homes and small businesses.

We made it back to the hotel around 5:00 pm. Along the way we spotted Dolores on her bike, retracing her steps because she had lost her red shoulder bag with her camera inside when she took a tumble earlier. Luckily, Jim and Vickie helped her find it; the conspicuous red bag was lying off the side of the road where she had fallen! Marcel had his own little scare when he inadvertently left his camera in the bike's carriage in front of the hotel, and was also lucky to have retrieved it before somebody made off with it. Our photos make up the largest part of our travel memories, and I can't imagine what I would do if I lost my camera and memory card.

Marcel, Christiane and I headed back to West Street in the shuttle bus, and had dinner at a pizza joint on restaurant row. I ordered a Hawaiian pizza, which probably tasted better than normal due to the fact that we'd been eating Chinese food for eight consecutive days. We were joined by Gail and Rachael, who were doing some shopping in the marketplace nearby. After

dinner, we split up, and I accompanied Gail and her granddaughter through the rows of shops looking for some souvenir folding fans. I enlisted the services of little Rachael, who turned out to be the best negotiator in our group. Whenever she bargained with a Chinese vendor, this 13-year-old would whip out a calculator, do some math and then hardball it until she got her price. Case in point: a female vendor quoted me a price of 40 yuans for one souvenir fan, but Rachael got the seller to give me *four* fans for the same price! *Where was this girl when I was buying my car?*

We had to rush back to the hotel. After a quick shower and change, we all met in the lobby by 7:00 pm to attend the famous *Impressions Light Show* created in 2004 by Zhang Yimou, the man who choreographed the spectacular opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The open-air theater, which can accommodate up to 2500 people, is about a mile from West Street, and uses the Li River as its stage, with 12 surrounding mountains as the backdrop. The lighting and sound equipment is well hidden, and whenever they light up the backdrop, it is a mesmerizing scene. The folk musical and dance show lasts about 70 minutes, incorporating 600 local actors, more than half are actually fishermen by day! It is amazing how they're able to switch scenes in fishing boats and movable piers in the dark with so many people. At times, the actors are wearing lighted suits, which made for an eerie image. The show combines classical Sanjie Liu's folk songs with the exotic local fishing culture to re-create the life of the minority peoples. The storyline centers on a traditional love tale, but I had no idea what was going on. I was just blown away by the choreographed splendor of the entire show. The only bad experience was the behavior of some of the spectators. We sat in front of a group of rural Chinese folks who didn't shut up during the entire performance. At one point, newlyweds Duong and Quynh took turns 'shushing' and giving these people dirty looks, but to no avail.

We got back to the hotel after 9:00pm. I was still hungry and found myself together with Steve and Susan in the hotel gift shop/food mart looking for something to eat. There were gift boxes of what appeared to be local dessert delicacies. Everything was in Chinese, but the pictures on the box displayed an assortment of cookies, crackers and other pastry items. Susan and I each bought a box to eat up in our rooms. *What a disappointment!* I sat on the edge of my bed and spent the better part of thirty minutes trying to dislodge these 'treats' from their cellophane cocoons, only to discover that each item tasted worse than the last! I nearly

chipped a tooth biting into one of the biscuits, and sampled cookies that had the consistency of cardboard. One of the more interesting snacks were the brittle, flour-like squares that literally pulverized in my hand as I tried to eat them. (The following morning I asked Susan what she thought of the delicacies, she made a face and went “ugh” and told me they had to throw them away). I turned on the television set hoping to watch the news, but this hotel didn’t get CNN, and all the other channels were in Chinese. I popped an Ambien and went to bed.

Day Ten

Today’s activities were simple, yet culturally rewarding. In the morning, we visited a local food market, meeting Leo, a cooking instructor from the Yangshuo Cooking School (a business co-owned by an Australian woman), who took us on a tour of the market. We walked down aisles filled with humongous vegetables: carrots, ginger, turnips, tara roots and potatoes. They had food stalls selling cooked chicken feet and other local dishes. There was a section to buy live fish, eels, snakes, frogs and chickens. In the back of the market, but not for the faint of heart, was a butcher’s section with stalls selling and chopping every conceivable kind of meat available in Yangshuo. One stall specialized in dog meat, and had several gutted and hairless canine carcasses on a butcher’s table. The stall next door had dead, skinned cats hanging from hooks. We saw decapitated pigeons and geese. *Thank goodness I had already eaten before coming here!*

From the food market we traveled to the cooking school, which is situated on the banks of the Li River. We split up into two groups of ten. Leo instructing one group and another teacher named Jennifer was in charge of *our* group. Tables had been set up in a U-formation. Each one of us had a hot plate, a cast iron wok and other cooking utensils and plates. The spices and foods we would be using were all provided for and set up by the employees of the school. All we had to do was listen and watch Chef Jennifer prepare each dish, and then try it on our own (with supervision, of course!). We donned aprons and got to work.

Earlier, during breakfast, Michael had echoed my own sentiments concerning the whole cooking school experience; he likened the excursion to nothing more than filler, an exercise China Spree had come up with to keep us busy for half a day. But as the class proceeded, and we learned how to cook popular Chinese dishes, this became one of our favorite tour endeavors, both fun and informative. At lunchtime, each one of us ended up eating the dishes we'd prepared; and as far as I could tell, everyone enjoyed their meal.

Jennifer first gave us a brief introduction into wok seasoning (using peanut oil to grease and condition the pan), and the various spices used in Chinese cooking, and how to properly cut meats and poultry into thin strips for quicker cooking, and how to prep the veggies. Then we started making our first dish: *Steamed Chicken with Mushroom*. We sliced a chicken breast into thin strips, adding salt, pepper, peanut oil, and rice wine, placing all this on a small plate, scattering some chopped mushroom, wolfberries and dangshen over it, then putting the plate inside a Chinese steamer basket so that employees of the school could take it to another kitchen and steam it for approximately 15 minutes.

Our second dish was *Egg Wrapped Dumpling*, one of my favorites. After mixing minced pork, salt, black pepper, chopped mint and oyster sauce, we heated our woks, pouring a tablespoon of beaten eggs into it. As the egg quickly cooked, we placed a teaspoon of pork mixture near the edge of the omelet, flipping it over with a spatula to form a crescent shape dumpling. We prepared five dumplings each. We also made *Eggplant in Yangshuo Style*, which is wok-fried eggplant slices sautéed with garlic, ginger, chili paste and oyster sauce, then sprinkled with spring onions. *Stir Fried Pork with Vegetables* was a simple stir-fry affair while adding various spices, soy sauce and veggies to the mix. Our last dish, *Green Vegetables with Garlic*, was made with bok choy, stir-fried with crushed garlic, salt and oil, with a little water thrown in. When the final dish was prepared, we made our way outside to the courtyard and ate our five-dish meal at a series of covered picnic tables. I must say – not to pat my own back – but I think I'd make an excellent Chinese chef (um, providing Jennifer is by my side!). When we finally left the Yangshuo Cooking School that afternoon, most of us agreed it had been a wonderful cultural experience.

Our next stop would be an endearing one. China Spree had obtained permission for our group to visit the Zhongnam Elementary School in the town of Yangdi. The school, known as the Hope Elementary School, was

partially funded by the donation of a Chinese-American businessman. It consists of three classroom buildings, two-stories tall, situated around an open schoolyard. There are 16 teachers, and approximately 500 students who attend class here, hailing from the poor farming communities nearby. When we arrived it was either recess or lunchtime, and many of the children were playing in the courtyard. The students, who *all* looked adorable, went crazy when we they saw us, smiling and high-fiving and posing for pictures. The young principal, whose name escapes me, met us at the entrance and escorted us to a classroom where he gave us a brief history of the school and answered our questions (with Sue and Lisa interpreting). Meanwhile, dozens of students were crammed in front of the open windows staring and giggling at us. I took so many wonderful photos of their beaming faces. Lisa had brought along a bag of donated pencils, pens and notebooks (courtesy of China Spree) and Duong and Quynh surprised everyone by presenting the principal with a bag of snacks for the students.

We were shown the small library on the second floor, and an even smaller gym room where antiquated equipment gave the place the aura of a museum display. Several tour members took turns playing ping-pong with the students in the schoolyard. And Bill was a big hit, picking up the kids and playfully chasing them around, while they laughed and laughed. *What a wonderful experience this was.* Later, we sat in on a classroom and took turns reading aloud from a schoolbook in English while the students recited what we read in unison. The students were so well disciplined that when we were ready to leave – for all the excitement our visit generated – they were all in their classrooms continuing their lessons. I think this particular visit really separated China Spree from the other tour companies, demonstrating an honest desire to give their travelers a real cultural experience; besides the modern cities and wonderful ancient sites, they didn't hesitate to show us 'the other side' of China -- the rural, poorer areas.

From the Zhongnam School, on our way to the airport, we stopped at a local shop called the South China Pearl Museum. Sue told us that, among other things, Guilin is famous for its South China Pearls. As with all the previous companies or factories we'd visited, an official guide met us and gave us a brief lecture on the cultivation of pearls. Pearls from the South China Sea are highly prized. These particular pearls are perfectly round and are formed one at a time in smaller oysters. Freshwater pearls, on the other hand, come from much bigger oysters capable of producing up to twenty pearls, their shapes often irregular. While pearls come in a variety of colors

depending on their mineral composition, gold and black pearls are rare and the most expensive. The guide also showed us how to tell real pearls from fake. Fake pearls, when rubbed together, do not scratch, remaining perfectly smooth, whereas real pearls will leave marks if rubbed together. We were then allowed thirty minutes or so to browse or shop in their showroom. They had a coffee shop that sold excellent espresso, something I really missed coming from Miami. I purchased a set of violet colored South Sea pearl earrings for my girlfriend after seeing Rachael trying on a pair. The salesgirl then convinced me to buy a matching pendant and bracelet. I'm glad we left after thirty minutes, for I fear that charming salesgirl would have emptied out my bank account!

We proceeded to the Guilin Airport and were surprised when our 7:15pm flight to Shanghai actually left on time! Our dinner that night consisted of whatever we were served on the plane trip. I think I had some kind of chicken dish. We arrived in Shanghai by 9:15pm, meeting our final local guide, a very pretty and perky young woman named Qi, who sashayed when she walked and had a very sweet and animated way about her. Her voice was soft but with a high lilt -- almost Betty Boop-style -- and I must confess, I was utterly smitten with her. The group, as usual, was totally exhausted by the time we arrived at the amazing 5-Star Pullman Shanghai Skyway Hotel on Dapu Road near the center of the city. It was nighttime, and the lighted skyline reminded me of New York City. But I was too tired to explore that evening. Like most of my fellow tour members, I went straight to bed.

Day Eleven

Since we would be spending the final days of our tour in Shanghai, I took the opportunity to unpack my entire suitcase and take stock of my remaining clean clothes. I had just enough shirts, pants and clean underwear to see me through! Most of my clean shirts were pretty wrinkled by now, but

Gail taught me a little traveler's trick; I would hang my shirt in the bathroom while taking a hot shower, closing the door to trap the steam and – *wa-la!* wrinkles gone.

At 7:20am I went up to the buffet restaurant on the 49th floor, which offered a spectacular view of Shanghai. The 52-story Pullman Shanghai Skyway was the best hotel we stayed while in China, located in the Luwan District of Puxi (the original 'old city'), not far from the Xujiahui Business District in the heart of Shanghai. This skyscraper had it all: 6 restaurants and bars, fully equipped gym, indoor swimming pool and spa, the latest mobile technology, easy access to the city and close proximity to both of the city's international airports. I had breakfast with Michael, and we shared our thoughts about China and the current state of affairs in our own country. Traveling this many days in China one can't help but make comparisons. What was evident to us, despite the communist control of the government, was that this country was definitely progressing forward at an almost alarming rate. Much of the inner city restructuring that has transformed China's largest metropolises into modern mega-cities has occurred over the past twenty years. The amount of construction – *everywhere* -- was staggering.

There seems to be a genuine desire on behalf of the central government to greatly improve the lives of its people, and to modernize China as quickly as it can. Of course, this also leads to quite a number of problems. China's zeal to become an industrial global leader over the past thirty years has unleashed an environmental maelstrom. In every city or town we visited, the water contained so many metals it was not safe to drink. In fact, it is estimated that approximately 320 million urban residents (a number larger than the entire population of the United States) do not have access to clean water. The deforestation around Beijing has allowed the Gobi Desert to encroach ever closer; during a one-week period back in 2006, strong winds dumped more than 300,000 tons of sand on the capital.

Deregulation and corruption has created a development-at-any-cost mentality that allows businesses (many of which are foreign owned) to scoff at local laws, further polluting the environment. Smog in many cities is so bad it can sometimes obscure the skyline, not to mention the health issues that arise from very poor air quality. I read that hundreds of thousands of Chinese die each year due to complications arising from exposure to pollution. Unfortunately, China's political system does not allow individuals

to speak out and challenge government policies, nor does it allow much access to political tools (such as independent courts or regulatory commissions) so that local residents can fight environmentally damaging projects.

Besides the pollution issues, China's rapid economic growth has created a deepening disparity between the Haves and Have-Nots, an unusual conundrum in what was originally engineered to be a classless society. Every year, more and more public protests are recorded, especially in the rural areas where the populations have not reaped as much of the benefits of China's new capitalism as the city areas have. To its credit, the central government acknowledges all of this, but at its own pace. What makes China strong is that its massive population is governed by an equally strong central government, which can, when coaxed or motivated, maneuver huge resources and labor and affect change the way we cannot in our own country. Remember, China's current economic miracle is based on a *state-sponsored policy* that allowed private entrepreneurship back in the late seventies and early eighties. The communist government, in essence, abandoned a sizeable bulk of its own political dogma in order to re-shape their country. And I believe this is what they'll need to do to save it from the ravages of unchecked industrialization. If the government gets behind a solid plan to protect the environment, force businesses to comply with safety and environmental policies, then I think they can eventually 'go green'. The government of China seems to have the interests of the citizenry in mind. At least from what I was able to observe. They spend a lot of money on infrastructure, and implement many programs to try and lift the rural areas out of poverty. This is a self-serving endeavor, as well. I'm certain the leaders in Beijing do not have to look beyond the current uprisings in the Middle East to know that in a country with over 1.3 billion people, massive unrest is to be avoided at all costs.

Our first stop in Shanghai was to the observation deck of the 88-story Jin Mao Tower in the Pudong District, next to the Lujiazui business area. Once the tallest building in the People's Republic of China, its height was surpassed on September 14, 2007 by the adjacent Shanghai World Financial Center. But if tall skyscrapers are your thing, then just wait; next to these two buildings – and currently under construction – is the 128-story Shanghai Tower, slated to be the second tallest building on the planet when it is completed in 2014 (only the Burj Khalifa in Dubai will be taller). The Pudong District is the area just east of the Huangpu River, the main

waterway into Shanghai. The term Pudong actually means “east of the river”. If you had visited the city twenty years ago, nobody would have raised an eyebrow if you mentioned the Pudong District, because there was really nothing to see here back then. But over the past 17 years, an incredible construction frenzy has created a remarkable futuristic-looking skyline that some have described as being reminiscent of the Jetson’s cartoon city. From across the Huangpu River, the Pudong resembles a jumbled maze of colorful round, spiral and pointy-shaped buildings and skyscrapers seemingly built in no particular pattern.

An architectural firm from Chicago designed the Jin Mao Tower. Drawing on traditional Chinese architecture, such as the tiered pagoda, the tower subtly takes on a rhythmic pattern as it rises. The building’s proportions revolve around the number 8, which is a symbolic number meaning ‘prosperity’ in Chinese culture; hence, the 88-floor design. Built around an octagon-shaped concrete wall, the structure is divided into 16 segments, each 1/8 shorter than the 16-story base. The basement’s three levels contain parking garages (for both cars and bicycles), a food court and express elevators to the 88th floor’s observation deck known as the Skywalk. Near the entrance elevators is a wax replica of movie star Jackie Chan; we couldn’t resist and posed for pictures. The first fifty floors of the tower are made up of high-end offices. But the main tenant is the 555-room Shanghai Grand Hyatt, taking up the 53rd to the 87th floors, with a remarkable barrel-shaped atrium extending thirty floors that can be seen from the Skywalk looking down, a view that inspires vertigo.

We spent more than an hour in the Jin Mao Tower, taking photographs from the Skywalk and admiring the panoramic view of Shanghai. This is an amazing city. Qi, our local guide, told us there are 4,500 skyscrapers (buildings with 17 or more floors) in Shanghai, as compared to 850 or so in New York City. Shanghai is not only a global financial center, with more than 120,000 foreigners living and working here, but seems poised to become the model for cities of the future. On first impression, it made the Big Apple (my place of birth) seem weathered and frumpy; but then again, New York City is considerably older, our subway system has been in continuous operation for more than 80 years! I’d like to see how well this ‘new’ Shanghai holds up over time.

We boarded the bus and made our way back across the Huangpu River, to one of the oldest sections of Shanghai, the area known as Puxi, the Old City.

A thick wall once encircled the Old City, a fragment of which still remains today and is reminiscent of the fast-disappearing history of Shanghai. If you want to get a feel of what Old Shanghai was once like, you need to visit this area soon before China's modernization process tears the whole thing down. There are narrow alleyways where residents still hang their clothes out on bamboo poles to dry. You can still witness stone gatehouses (*shikumen*), small temples, local teahouses and marketplaces here, but the wrecking ball always seems to be just around the corner!

We ended up at the waterfront boulevard known as the Bund, which is derived from an Anglo-Indian term meaning 'muddy embankment'. During the 1920's the Bund became the city's foreign street. American, British, Japanese, French, Russian, German and other nations built banks, clubs, trading houses, consulates and hotels in a wide range of styles from neoclassical to art deco along the waterfront, a good portion of it still standing, creating a throwback atmosphere. It was from this section that modern day Shanghai would expand and become the city it is today. In fact, standing on the embankment, one gets a glimpse of both the past and future of this great city; the Bund characterizes the Old Shanghai, while the stunning view of the Pudong District across the Huangpu River, with its glistening modern buildings, represents the future of Shanghai.

The riverfront side of the Bund is full of street life. The city rebuilt the promenade and it is a perfect place to gather or stroll and take in the sites. There are impressive statues and a World War II memorial. In the early dawn, like other areas of China, people come out to do aerobic exercises, practice kung fu, qi gong or tai chi. At night, the buildings along the waterfront, including those from the Pudong District, are lit up, and the place becomes almost magical. We spent some time walking along the promenade, taking those postcard snapshots of the Pudong skyline, which includes the Oriental Pearl Tower, with its two giant pearl-shaped buildings.

After visiting the Bund, we went to a very popular local restaurant called Chong Qing Cygnet for lunch. This was another cultural experience for us; the establishment is a 'hot pot' restaurant. Hot pot cooking is a traditional Chinese method of communal cooking. Usually, a family, or a group of families, would share one pot, which contained boiling water, and you simply added to it whatever you wanted to cook. It's like sharing the same stove, if you will. We sat at a long table in a private room, and in front of each one of us was a small plastic hot plate on top of which was a pot

divided into two sections filled with liquid (one was mild, the other spicy). We turned our hot plates on and waited for the water compartments to boil. On the table was a vast array of raw foods, from meatballs to sausages, to noodles and vegetables. The idea was to pick up a food item (with your chop sticks) and place them in one of the two liquid compartments of your hot pot and cook them (at a boiling temperature) for at least two minutes. At that point, it was ready to be eaten. Lisa and Qi kept admonishing us to make sure we cooked everything thoroughly. This turned out to be one of the few meals I did not enjoy; perhaps because I tended to overcook everything to avoid getting sick, making the food taste soggy and bland no matter how much additional hot sauce I put into the pot. Near my duplex apartment in Miami is an authentic Chinese restaurant that caters to the local Asian community, and whenever I go there for take-out I can observe Chinese families eating their entire meal using this hot pot method. *Personally, give me fried rice and egg rolls anytime!*

From lunch, we drove over to the fascinating Shanghai Museum, located in front of the People's Square (where the municipal government building stands), and spent the next several hours gazing at ancient Chinese art. The beautiful building housing the world-famous museum was built in 1996 (although the museum itself is much older) and has a square base with a round top attached with arches. This design is from the Chinese philosophy of Ding, which states that the earth is square and the sky is round (the same concept at the Temple of Heaven complex in Beijing). Guarding the front of the building are eight imposing white marble lion statues. This was one of the best-designed and laid-out museums I have ever visited. The building is four stories tall, including one underground level. There are three main halls and eleven galleries, covering numerous topics and categories of Chinese art: Ancient Bronze, Ancient Ceramics, Ancient Jade, Ancient Sculpture, Paintings, Calligraphy, Coins, Seals, Ming and Qing Furniture, and Minority Nationalities.

We were given two and a half hours to wander about the museum. I started my tour by taking the escalator to the top floor and working my way down to the lobby. There were many excellent displays on this floor, but I really enjoyed the Chinese Minority Nationalities' Art Gallery, which had samples of the various tribal dresses from China's different minorities, including the Mongols and Manchu's. The over-whelming majority of Chinese are Hans, and they consider anyone who is not of Han descent to be a member of the minority peoples, even if some of these 'minorities'

periodically ruled over them. The Ancient Jade Gallery was also interesting, with many intricately sculpted Jade figurines and statues. There was also a fascinating display of coins that were used along the Ancient Silk Road; what is unusual is that many of these coins were not Chinese, but rather from the other civilizations and kingdoms that did business with them, like Greek coins from Alexander the Great's time, coins from the Indus Valley and from eastern European kingdoms.

The third floor had wonderful paintings (many depicting the natural landscape we saw in Guilin) and Calligraphy Art (which, I must confess, I had no idea was even considered art, I thought it was just Chinese written characters on paper). One section had a collection of official seals from different Chinese dynasties, from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. Official seals (and the imprints they made on documents, writings, paintings, etc) underwent an elaborate transformation, and some of the most artful seals were on display here. I particularly enjoyed viewing the seals because while in Beijing I purchased one from our local guide, Wilson, as a souvenir. Known as a chop block, the seal I purchased was made of a cheap quality jade, with my Chinese Zodiac symbol engraved on the handle and my English name with its Chinese counterpart below it. You press the seal onto an inkpad and then stamp it to create your unique mark.

The second floor consisted mainly of handcrafted ceramics, with a replica of an ancient kiln and samples of mold castings. The main floor had fantastic bronze pieces and other sculptures, including some really nice statues and steles of Buddha. By now, though, I was really picking up the pace in order to get back to the lobby for the agreed upon rendezvous time.

From the Shanghai Museum we drove the short distance to the French Concession, where we were given thirty minutes to browse and take photographs. The foreign concessions came about as a result of the Unequal Treaties, which were a series of land concessions imposed on the Qing Dynasty during the 19th and 20th centuries by foreign powers after they won military skirmishes against the Chinese. Basically, these concessions became like mini-colonies within China, where the foreign country ruled over its section, or concession, as if it were a sovereign territory. Each concession was unique to its foreign masters, with the French Concession taking on the look and feel of a Parisian street, complete with cafes and French restaurants and building designs. Till this day, the French Concession still retains its 'French flavor', and is a very popular tourist spot. I owed Gail and Rachael

some ice cream (they bought me some at the airport the night before) so I treated them to Haagen-Dazs in one of the open-air cafes.

We arrived back at our hotel by 5:00pm, giving us an hour to rest before dinner. We ate at a local restaurant not far from the hotel. After the disappointing 'hot pot' lunch I made sure to stock up, getting my fill off the Lazy Susan. Later, we walked from the restaurant (about a block) to the Bai YuLan Theatre on South Chong Qing Road for a 7:30 performance of The New Shanghai Circus. I had no idea what to expect; the travel brochure described this show as some kind of acrobatic extravaganza.

When we walked into the theater lobby I was immediately transported to the movie theaters of my youth; there was an old-fashion candy concession stand in one corner, with fresh popcorn smell wafting through the air. The inside of the theater was completely red: red carpets, red seats, red curtains. The only drawback was the seats, which were small and offered little leg space. When the show started the curtain went up and a group of muscular-looking Chinese women began a dance routine in cheesy costumes. During their set, a sole Chinese juggler came out and tried to twirl something, which he dropped on his first attempt. Afterwards, a group of men garnishing dragon costumes started to prance on stage. I remember looking over at Steven and rolling my eyes as if to say: "*What a crock!*" I couldn't believe I was going to have to sit through this show for almost an hour and a half. Well, they must perform that lame introduction just to tease the audience, because what ensued from that point forward was absolutely amazing.

Each act was more difficult and incredible than the last; with acrobatic feats that had us leaning forward in utter suspense, slack-jawed and wondering *how did they do that?* A male dance sequence had the dancers twirling hats up into the air the entire time, catching them with hands and heads while jumping over each other, never missing a step or beat. The woman did a dance sequence while spinning plates on sticks the entire time, jumping and leaping, and not one plate fell until they all dropped them deliberately at the end of the number. They performed backbreaking gymnastic routines, sometimes twirling in the air on rings or ropes, suspended by their hands, a leg or, at times, *their teeth!* The women did an act on bicycles where they literally piled on top of each other, sometimes jumping onto each other's shoulders while riding without breaking stride. The finale was an incredible stunt; five individual motorcycle drivers zooming around (and upside down) inside a steel ball cage without crashing

into one another. Everybody left the theater that night excited. *What a great show!*

We got back to the hotel after 10:00pm. Lisa told us we would be having another long day tomorrow, advising us to get a good night's sleep. And I always heeded my Dragon Mom's advice...

Day Twelve

We hit the road earlier today than usual – at 7:30 am – in order to beat the traffic out of the city. Our major stop was the Tongli water village about a two-hour bus ride from Shanghai. On the way we also visited the Master-Of-Nets Garden in Suzhou, an official UNESCO World Heritage Site. This particular garden is one of the best examples of a classical Chinese home garden, demonstrating the synthesizing of art, nature and architecture to create a uniquely metaphysical ambience. When we arrived at Suzhou, our bus driver parked on a main street and we had to walk through a maze of alleyways – which were actually walled residential compounds – to reach the Master-Of-Nets Garden. Originally built more than 800 years ago during the Southern Song Dynasty, it was the home of the Deputy Civil Service Minister. Following his death, the house passed through numerous ownerships until it fell into disrepair. In 1785, a retired government official from the Qing Dynasty named Song Zonghuan restored the property, drastically redesigning the garden area and adding several more buildings to the initial house. He often said he considered himself more of a fisherman than a government official (alluding to the simple life of the local fishermen) and he changed the name to the Master-of-the-Nets Garden. The property that we saw has since been further restored and redesigned by subsequent owners, until 1958, when the daughter of the last owner, fulfilling her father's last wishes, donated the property to the Suzhou government as a historical site.

One of the interesting things about the Master-of-Nets Garden is that it is among the smaller gardens in Suzhou, yet because of its use of space, it actually gives the illusion of being much larger. Remember, although it is called a garden, this is actually a residential home. The garden is divided

into three sections: a residential area, a central garden, and an inner garden. The central garden has a pond – which is the center of the property – with a small pavilion accessible by a narrow bridge. The pond was full of fish. From this central garden area are pathways leading to numerous buildings or rooms throughout the house, such as the master study, the library, and the dining and sitting rooms, plus several pavilions. These buildings have pathways (some through round entranceways) to other sections of the house and the inner garden. Again, although the property is not large, the open courtyards, windows, doors and gardens give the illusion of space. The design concept behind this style of architecture is to achieve serenity and peace with nature, and as we walked through it, this was clearly evident.

I had one scary moment during this visit, which I am almost too embarrassed to share in this journal. But, for posterity's sake, here goes:

Towards the back of the Master-Of-Nets Garden we passed a bathroom facility (or, as Lisa referred to them, a Happy Room) and I made a 'pit stop' thinking this was the end of the tour. When I reemerged from the bathroom *the group was gone*. I assumed they were heading to the front of the house, so I retraced my steps trying to catch up to them. When I reached the entrance the only group of tourists I encountered was another (ironically enough) China Spree Tour, which had just arrived from Hong Kong and was also staying at the Pullman Skyway Hotel. I asked their Chinese guide if she had seen my group and she told me, "I think they already left". *What?* How could this be? I was only in the bathroom for about 2-3 minutes! I followed the other China Spree Tour group through the alleyways back to the main street, but I did not see our bus. *Whoa!* Thinking they must still be back at the Master-Of-Nets Garden I quickly, and foolishly, rushed back into the alleyways without getting my bearings straight. To make a long story short, I got lost. Each alley pathway looked the same to me, and the more I continued, the more I realized I had no idea where I was. I finally asked an elderly Chinese gentleman where the Master-Of-Nets Garden was, and while he did not speak English he did understand the word 'garden' and he kindly escorted me to the building. I could have kissed his craggily face! No sooner than I reached the entrance my group emerged from another section of the garden and I realized I had gone the wrong way when I left the bathroom. I kept my composure, at first too embarrassed to tell the others how panicky I had become. What made me feel even more foolish was that nobody even knew I had been missing!

From here, we visited the town's factory-run silk weaving museum, the Suzhou No. 1 Silk Factory, in business since 1926. Qi took us to a conference room where she gave us a brief lecture on the silk industry, showing us glass displays of the life cycle of silk worms. Afterwards, we walked through the factory, or at least the section they show tourists, and we learned more about silk worms and the mulberry plants they munch on, silk reeling, silk weaving and silk quilt making. They had bulky weaving machines that resembled something out of an Industrial Revolution-era sweatshop. When the factory tour was over we ended up in a beautiful department store that sold everything made out of silk. They even put on a fashion show for us. I purchased some silk scarves for my girlfriend and my sister-in-law, but I was not able to bargain since this was a government-run establishment. I'm assuming I got a much better price than I would have gotten back home. I'm not a silk connoisseur, so I wouldn't know.

Next, we drove to the Tongli water village just 18 kilometers from Suzhou, situated on the eastern shore of Taihu Lake. This area of Suzhou has several water towns and is often referred to as the 'Venice of the East' because of the system of canals and waterways that crisscross the region. Suzhou is located in the southeastern Jiangsu Province, adjacent to Shanghai, and is part of the Yangtze River Delta. It has a 2500-year-old history, and contains many cultural relics of China's past, making it a top tourist attraction. One of them is Tongli, a water village approximately 24 square miles in size; and while there are many roads here, the main arteries are actually canals that can only be accessed via small boats or gondolas. The town has seven islets separated by 15 canals, connected by a series of arched stone bridges. Built during the Song Dynasty more than 1000 years ago, it somehow avoided much of the violent upheavals that successive dynasties and foreign intervention had created in other Chinese regions, thus leaving behind excellent examples of classical Chinese architecture.

Before we began exploring Tongli we had lunch at the Nanyuan Tea House, a 100-year-old restaurant situated along one of the main canals. We sat on the second floor, which had a wonderful view of the canals through lovely wood-carved windows. The Nanyuan Tea House was the first local restaurant we ate in that offered freshly baked bread. The food was served on blue and white porcelain plates and dishes, and quite tasty. A unique delicacy they served was *wanshanti*, pig's knuckles braised in soy sauce, rice wine and other spices that melt in your mouth (a little fatty, though). When lunch was over, we spent twenty minutes browsing in the small

market place just outside the restaurant. I was able to purchase an embroidered drawing of a Chinese garden house for only 20 yuans, which now hangs on my wall.

We followed Lisa and Qi through stone passageways and even narrower alleyways until we reached the center of Tongli, a labyrinth of canals, small stone bridges and more slender alleyways. Along the main canals were al fresco restaurants and cafes, and small gift shops. We visited one of the traditional home museums, where I was able to explore the back of the house and go upstairs, taking photographs of the stone courtyard below. But unlike the Master-Of-Nets Garden we had seen earlier, this typical Tongli home did not emit that sense of space, nor did I feel any serenity walking through the narrow hallways. In fact, it felt pretty dark and creepy. After touring the house, Lisa and Qi secured two gondolas for us. It took about forty minutes or so to traverse the main canals, but we got a very good view of the town from this vantage point. Qi told us Tongli was very popular amongst Chinese, and on weekends and holidays the restaurants and hotels were packed. She also told us that the actual homeowners in Tongli rent their homes out to the vendors. So, basically, the town was one big self-sustaining tourism industry.

Near the town square we visited another UNESCO World Heritage site called the Retreat and Reflection Garden (or Tuisi garden). Another classical Chinese garden home, it is divided into an eastern residential area and a western main garden court with two minor courtyards attached to it. Built in 1885, the design of this garden is unique in that it uses an east-west axis as opposed to the more traditional north-south axis. The water level in the main courtyard's pond was kept high deliberately, the buildings spaced further back from the water, another unique feature of this home. There were lovely flowerbeds here, too, and unusual rock formations. Like the Master-Of-Nets Garden, the residential rooms seemed more spacious than they really were due to the illusion of openness created by the gardens and courtyards.

We wearily boarded the bus and drove two and a half hours back to Shanghai. This would be our last full night together as a group since tomorrow was our 'free day' and everybody had made individual sightseeing plans. We had our *farewell* dinner at the famous Xian Qiang Fang restaurant in Shanghai, another 100-year-old establishment that was formerly a French eatery; its brick building covered in ivy, the swanky venue inside offered both large dining halls or a myriad of private rooms. The food, as expected,

was great. Lisa made an emotional toast to the group. It must be difficult for someone to spend two weeks of every month with a group of strangers, bond with them so closely and then have to say goodbye to them, probably forever. In fact, this is how I feel after each guided tour.

Back at the hotel we gathered in the lobby for a final group photo, and to exchange email addresses. Most of us gave Lisa envelopes stuffed with tip money that night, as well. I'm certain my fellow travelers were generous; Lisa was, by far, one of the best tour directors I've ever had. Marcel and Christiane were going to take a taxi to the Bund to experience the waterfront at night and invited me to join them, but I was too tired. It had been another very long day and I was exhausted.

Day Thirteen

Today was our 'free day' in Shanghai. Lisa had given us a map of the city the night before and a list of suggested sites we might want to check out. I was up early, as usual, and had my customary three cups of coffee while writing in my journal notebook. After a showering and shaving, I met Gail and Rachael for breakfast on the 49th floor restaurant. Rachael wanted to see the pandas at the Shanghai Zoo (a stop that was originally scheduled on our itinerary, but later dropped for some reason). I love going to the zoo, so I tagged along. Shortly after 9:00am the three of us climbed into a taxi for the thirty-minute traffic-filled journey to the western side of the city where the Shanghai Zoo is located. This was my first taxi ride in China, and I must say, despite the crazy lane-changing driving style of the Chinese, the experience was not all that bad. In China, the taxis – at least the ones that are not privately owned – go strictly by the meter, and when it's time to pay, the driver prints out a receipt that not only lists the total cost of the fare, but also includes the cab's number, the driver's name and ID, and a phone number to call in case you want to lodge a complaint or left something behind. The trip cost us 53 yuans, the equivalent of eight dollars.

It was a holiday weekend in China, and the crowds were large. I've been to quite a few zoological sites in my time – Miami's Metro Zoo, the Bronx

Zoo, the Smithsonian Zoo in Washington, DC, etc – but I've never been to one as nice as this. The Shanghai Zoo is big, modern and nicely laid out, with more than 600 species of wildlife and over 500 species of plants on display. But it is not just a synthetic park for wildlife conservation and education; it is also a recreational park in every sense of the word. They have amusement rides for the kids, including an enormous Ferris wheel that renders one heck of an overview of the entire complex. There is a man-made lake, picnic areas and even a field for camping. The entire grounds were very well maintained. The only caveat was the behavior of the crowds towards the animals. Although the signs clearly stated DO NOT FEED OR TEASE THE ANIMALS, *everybody* kept throwing food and teasing the poor creatures. This must be a cultural thing, because even the animals were used to it. We saw bears that would literally stand up and pose in order to get something to eat. And the hyenas managed to separate a blow-up toy from its owner, running around their cage playing with the piece of plastic!

The Panda House was at the far end of the zoo and we made our way along the outermost southern trail, which also seemed to have the least amount of people on it. We passed the primate section first and saw everything from baboons to spider monkeys, orangutans, gibbons, brown capuchins, pig-tailed macaques, gorillas and a dozen more species I never knew existed! We came across the Asian elephants, hippos, giraffes, zebras, bison, South American tapir, sea lions and earless seals, polar bears, an assortment of wild deer, cheetahs, tigers and lions (oh, my!). I'm not going to list all the animals here, suffice it to say we saw quite a selection, and the cages and containment areas were mostly spacious and well maintained. The Panda House was mobbed, as you can imagine, and several of the panda cubs were in a playful mood, pulling down tree branches and wrestling with one another. One giant panda was snoozing on his side with one paw comically covering his face. By the time we reached the Panda House, Gail and I were exhausted; little Rachael, though, was gung-ho to see the *other* half of the zoo. We finally convinced her we'd seen (or had) enough, and made our way back to the entrance following the main trail, which cut directly through the park.

We agreed to spend a little time shopping for souvenirs at the Yu Yuan Gardens bazaar and boarded a taxi for another long ride across the city. The Yu Yuan Gardens is a traditional Chinese garden residence built during the Ming Dynasty more than 400 years ago. It takes up an area of approximately 5 acres, and is situated in the center of the Old City. The garden was

designed by Pan Yunduan, who spent twenty years trying to ‘perfect’ it as a retirement gift for his father, Pan En, a high-ranking official in the Ming Dynasty. The residential garden fell into disrepair over the centuries – it was even damaged during the Opium Wars when foreign troops occupied it – and had to be restored various times. During the 1950’s the Shanghai government repaired the damage done to the Yu Yuan Gardens by Japanese forces in WWII and finally opened it to the public in 1961 as a historical site. I would love to describe the inside of the residence... *but I can’t*. We did not go inside. Although, I’m sure it resembled – to a great degree – the previous residential gardens we had seen in Suzhou. The reason we came here is because right outside the gates of the Yu Gardens (its more popular name) is this remarkable bazaar. And I do mean *remarkable*.

The Yu Garden Bazaar is the shopping Mecca that has sprung up around the Yu Yuan Garden in the northeastern section of the Old City. Amidst the traditional red-walled buildings with upturned tile roofs, the marketplace almost resembles a Disneyland theme park, and the enormous, bustling crowds made it *feel* like one, too. In between Renmin Road and Fang Bang Road, you will discover street after street lined with curio shops, artwork and handicraft sellers, souvenir stores, sidewalk vendors, restaurants, fast-food joints, cafes and fine jewelry shops. This is the place to pick up those last-minute souvenirs and trinkets just before heading home. And the bargains are excellent, that is, *if you know how to bargain*. Never accept the initial vendor’s price, even if the merchandise has a price tag on it. One thing I learned about shopping in China, nothing is cast in stone. You have to bargain, bargain and bargain...*and then haggle some more!*

We arrived at the bazaar around 2:00 pm and decided to have lunch first. Personally, I am not a big fast-food fan, but when we came upon a McDonald’s I had to choke back tears. As an American, a Big Mac and fries seemed like the appropriate way to end the monotony of 12 days of constant Chinese food! We almost couldn’t find a place to sit; the McDonald’s was packed solid. I thought the meal would be cheaper, too, seeing as how we were in China. But a Big Mac combo ended up costing what it does back home. As I ate the burger and fries I couldn’t discern any difference in the taste. I guess a Big Mac is a Big Mac anywhere!

As we finished our lunch a young Chinese girl approached me and asked if I was a tourist. She said she was a college student majoring in Tourism and if I would be so kind as to take a survey for a class assignment. I

hesitated momentarily because I'd read about con artists in China approaching tourists in this very manner. But the girl smiled so sweetly and insisted the survey would only take a few minutes. I looked over at Gail and Rachael, two of the biggest pushovers I've ever met, and knew that if I didn't acquiesce I would be Richard the Ogre. The survey, it turned out, was pages long, and took considerably longer than 'just a few minutes'. When it was over, she took a photo of me signing the survey (I guess as proof that an *actual* foreigner had taken it) and asked me for my phone number which I gave... um, changing a few of the digits, of course. *I'm not a total idiot*. When we were done she handed me – as a token of her appreciation for taking the survey – some kind of adorable souvenir (a cute key chain or tiny coin purse; I don't remember) that I gave to Rachael.

We spent the next couple of hours maneuvering through the bazaar, picking up souvenirs. I had made a list of the people back home whom I wanted to buy souvenirs for; but after jamming all these items into my suitcase later that evening – cursing the whole while – I vowed to eliminate the 'souvenir list' from future travels! The bargains we received were great, though. With the help of Gail and Rachael I was able to buy four really nice T-shirts and many other items. Rachael negotiated a price of 5 yuans for a small purse with a woman vendor and then requested 18 of them (she was handing them out to her gymnastic team mates as souvenirs). I jumped in and purchased a few, as well – now that Rachael had done the bargaining for me (hee-hee-hee). Later, we came upon a row of artisans who made personalized souvenirs while you waited. Rachael had her name in Chinese molded from copper wire. It was after 4:00pm by the time we hailed a cab and made it back to the hotel. The ladies went upstairs to their room and we agreed to meet for dinner at six o'clock.

Using the suggestion list that Lisa had given us the day before, I decided to do a little reconnoitering near the hotel to see if I could find a good place for dinner. The Tian Zi Fang area was about a fifteen-minute walking distance from the Pullman Skyway Hotel. Described as a typical Shanghai *shikumen*, the Tian Zi Fang was actually a factory complex that had been converted into an 'art street', with many shops selling high-end fashion clothes and artwork, with numerous bistros and foreign restaurants. It seemed like the kind of place that would be fun to explore so I walked half a block to Xujiahui Road, a major business avenue, and turned right until I reached Luban Road. One block further north was the bustling Tai Kang

Road where the Tian Zi Fang is located; but all I saw, initially, were a series of back street shops and restaurants. It didn't look all that exciting...until I came upon a stylish stone archway in one of the alleyways and looked inside. A *shikumen* is a collection of two or three-story terrace houses protected by high brick walls. These residences are connected and arranged in straight alleys, the brick walls forming the corridors. Basically, it resembles a grid-like maze of alleyways, with a stone archway over each entrance. As I walked down these narrow lanes, with Chinese lanterns and signs suspended from the stories above, I felt as if I'd been transported back to the Shanghai of the 1920's. I was really excited to have 'discovered' this place and couldn't wait to tell Gail and Rachael about it.

I hurried back to the hotel. At 6:00pm the three of us set out for Tai Kang Road, only this time I used a side street off of Xuijiahui Road to bypass the busy Luban intersection. We ate dinner at a restaurant I'd seen earlier, which was decorated just like a Johnny Rockets back home. We each ordered cheeseburgers with fries, and Rachael got an order of onion rings, which she was nice enough to share with me. The burgers were huge, but slightly undercooked; in fact, Gail's was downright pink inside. I was pretty hungry and ate the whole thing, minus the lettuce and tomatoes (Gail warned me to be careful about the produce since we had no idea how they had been washed).

After dinner we spent about two hours strolling down the Tian Zi Fang alleyways, browsing in the various shops. Unlike the Yu Garden bazaar, this marketplace was more upscale. We strolled side-by-side with hipster types and passed well-dressed foreign men (who probably worked in the Shanghai financial sector) with their decked out Chinese girlfriends having drinks or dinner in the chic-looking bistros. Even the storeowners/employees wore fashionably stylish clothes, decorating their shops in an artful manner. We ventured into several different photography shops, gazing at wonderful still pictures, and saw paintings, drawings, tile works in other places. I read that the Tian Zi Fang is a fashion center, and many of the clothes, shoulder bags, and even sneakers (Rachael bought a pair of 'tricked out' Keds) are all originally designed here. This was such a fun way to spend our last evening in China.

By 8:30pm we were back at the hotel. The group had earlier agreed to meet in one of the fancy barrooms on the 50th floor for a farewell drink. I had not seen any of the other members all day, so it was fun to catch up and

find out what sections of Shanghai they had explored. Several of my companions had apparently been drinking for a while and were feeling no pain. Boy, did I have fun with these people. I would miss them all. I said goodbye to the members who were returning via San Francisco; they would not be using the same airport as those of us returning to New York City, so tonight was our last time together. After hugging and kissing and promising to write and call, I said goodnight and went up to my room. I did some last minute re-packing, set my alarm clock for 3:30am (our ride to the airport was scheduled to leave at 5:30 am), and watched CNN until I fell asleep.

Day Fourteen

I was awakened with a jolt. Lisa had requested the front desk to make 3:30am wake-up calls for those of us leaving in the morning and both my alarm and phone went off simultaneously! I showered, put on my last clean clothes, made two cups of coffee and, just for the heck of it, repacked my suitcase. By 5:30am the group of JFK bound members (Steve, Susan, Bill, Wendy, Gail, Rachael, Jon, Sharon, Ying, Michael and myself) met in the lobby and boarded our bus for the older Hongqiao International Airport, which handles most of the domestic routes. We would fly to Beijing first and then transfer to an international flight for New York City. Lisa was waiting for us in the lobby. She handed out a boxed breakfast to each one of us and introduced a middle-aged Chinese woman from China Spree who would accompany us to the airport and help facilitate our way through the ticketing and baggage process. Unfortunately, this woman was not proficient in English. On the bus ride to the airport she kept giving us instructions over the microphone but none of us understood what she was saying.

We made it to the airport in good time, and, despite our new guide's lack of communication skills, managed to get through the boarding process without any problems. I inadvertently left my Ambien prescription inside my checked luggage and didn't realize it until it was too late. I was so upset. The idea of traveling for so many hours on a plane without my sleeping aid really pissed me off. I cursed myself repeatedly for my stupidity. I felt even worse

for Bill, who is taller than me and would have to suffer in his uncomfortable coach seat nursing a bad back. I had promised to give him some sleeping pills so he could endure the thirteen and a half hour flight. I had egg on my face. Sorry, Bill!

My journey home felt like an endurance test. We left Shanghai at 7:55am, arrived at Beijing International Airport two and a half hours later, transferred to a connecting gate for international flights (where we went through customs) and then were back in the air at 1:00 pm for our flight to New York City. I tried to get some sleep, but was unable to muster more than an hour at best. It was the longest thirteen and a half hours of my life. I tried to read, but couldn't. I tried to watch the in-flight movie, but the selection was terrible. Every so many hours I would go to the back of the plane for a bathroom pit stop, or to stretch my legs. I ran into Bill a few times and we chatted for a while. Poor guy couldn't sleep either.

Because of the time difference, we gained a day coming back to the United States and arrived at JFK on May 1st – the same day we left China – at approximately 2:30 pm. It took forever to clear customs and get our bags; by the time I reached the American Airlines ticket counter it was almost 4:00pm. My connecting flight to Miami didn't leave until 8:30 pm and the thought of waiting at JFK for another four and a half hours after having been traveling for a combined total of almost twenty hours was simply too much. I opted to pay an extra \$150 so I could get on an earlier flight. They had one seat available for 5:15pm. *Thank you.* Once I cleared the departure gate, I lost visual contact with Gail, Rachael and Michael, who were also flying American Airlines (back to Boston). I said a quick prayer for everyone, hoping all the tour members made it home okay. I was finally able to fall asleep on the plane ride back to Miami.

When I walked through the door of my duplex apartment that evening I was utterly exhausted and ready for bed. But for some strange reason I decided to turn on the television set. And then heard the news that President Obama was going to be addressing the nation with an important announcement. It was ten o'clock at night, what kind of announcement was he going to make, I wondered. Suddenly, I couldn't go to sleep. An hour later, our president told the country that a special military operation had just killed Osama Bin Laden. So much for getting a good night's rest! I stayed up until three in the morning watching the news coverage.

Over the next few weeks I would sort out my 2800-plus photos, hand out souvenirs and talk excitedly to anybody who would listen about my trip to China. This turned out to be one of the best guided tours I have ever taken. I credit China Spree for living up to their claim that this would be a cultural discovery, not a vacation. As the weeks passed, and I began researching and writing my journal, I looked back on my trip with new eyes. Our tour had taken us on a real representative journey throughout the country. In a period of two weeks we visited Beijing, the capital, with its political and historical significance; to Xian, the center of China, an industrial hub also steeped in history and archeological wonders; to Guilin, in the south, for a visit to an area of astonishing natural beauty; and finally, to the east coast, Shanghai, where the future of China beckons. We sampled the foods from the different regions, even trying our hand at cooking some of it. We stayed in beautiful hotels, but we also visited traditional garden homes, cave dwellings, a hutong residence and the wooden shack of a Long Sheng minority member. We experienced the contrast between big city life and the simpler living of farmers, fishermen and rural school children. We saw the ancient wonders of China's major historical sites, yet we marveled equally at the rice fields and karsts hills of Guilin. From the guides, to the restaurants, to the ancient sites, to the Shanghai Museum, to the street scenes... *everything was a learning experience*. I will never forget my trip to China.

I write journals of all my travels. I do this because, quite frankly, I do not trust my memory. As time goes by I want to be able to re-live my experiences beyond just looking at a photograph. And I always send my fellow travelers a copy. A gift from me to you, for your good company. And while this journal is about my unique perspective of the trip, we all shared the same experiences. So, to my fellow China Spree Tour members – Michael, Jon and Sharon, Bill and Wendy, Gail and Rachael, Marcel and Christiane, Steven and Susan, Gerry and Patricia, Delores and Ying, Duong and Quynh, Jim and Vicky, and, of course, Lisa – I dedicate this journal to all of you, and I hope that whenever you read it, it will always bring back the memory of our time together, and the wonderful journey we shared.

May the *Feng Shui* be with you...

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to the People's Republic of China was from April 18th to May 1st, 2011)

