

China Revisited: Shanghai and Beijing



Most of my preconceived ideas about China were wrong. Instead of the rice paddies and pagodas I'd imagined, I saw skyscrapers and super stores, inhabited and frequented by vibrant, hardworking and dynamic Chinese. Over a year ago, friends from the US asked Don and me to join them on a tour of China and Tibet. The idea of a tour was new for us and bothersome. We wondered how much control the tour would exert on our days and nights, balked at compulsory visits to factories and showrooms, and wondered about the others who would be on the tour. What tipped our decision to go was the fact that China, we thought, would be difficult to navigate on our own, and Tibet perhaps impossible. One week after the invitation, we signed up for the tour and never looked back. Overseas Adventure Travel (go to: www.oattravel.com) prides itself on small groups, abundant contact with the locals and experienced guides in all cities. In all areas, they kept their promises.

First stop: Shanghai. Don and I flew from Lisbon to Zurich on TAP and then to Shanghai with Swiss (a Star Alliance Partner). The 11 hour, 40 minute flight to China was the longest I'd ever endured. Sleep came fitfully as we flew mainly in daylight and on a packed plane. (Whomever the global, financial crisis affected, we rarely saw signs of it in China.) I was so excited when we arrived at our hotel (all pre-booked by the tour company) that I grabbed Don's arm and said, "Let's hit the streets."

One minute outside of our centrally located and comfortable Bund Hotel, an old man peddling a Peditaxi cab waved us in. Don, considerably more conservative than I, balked. "I'm going," I said, and he jumped in too. The "driver", with no English and few teeth, pedaled us around streets packed with Chinese celebrating one of their most important holidays: a week long commemoration of the founding of China in 1949. Finally after a 40 minute ride, weaving in and out of cars, bicycles and pedestrian traffic all crisscrossing the main streets like Nanking Road with no order at all, we tapped the man on the back and signaled that we wanted out. After some unsuccessful haggling about the price (we were still novices with the Yuan then) Don and I alighted into the mass of people only to be approached within

minutes by a Chinese young man with glossy pictures of many French and Italian "knockoffs" we had heard were sold in China. Feeling quite daring after the open air ride through town, we followed him across large and small streets into a series of rooms filled with other foreigners and display cases full of purses, watches, clothes and even golf clubs sporting the biggest brand names in the world. I'd been told in Paris earlier in the year that if one is spotted with a Louis Vitton or Prada copy, authorities could confiscate it and fine the person with it. In truth I've never had much interest in the copies, shunning the sellers of them along the Paredão in Cascais and never having patronized Canal Street in NYC. But in China, it seemed a game, and I admit to participating in it. On my return I've just read an article entitled "Can Knockoffs Knock Out Your Business?" in the October issue of the Harvard Business Review that has dampened my desire for the knockoffs. ..well, for future ones, not the ones I already bought!

Of course Shanghai and then Beijing were not about shopping, but I will tell you that at the Silk Market in Beijing, the copies (and excellent ones) are not clandestinely displayed at all, and prices even lower (with playful bargaining) than in Shanghai. Many years ago a friend said, "Shopping is just a vehicle to meet the people," and for sure he was right when it came to China. From "Angel" to "Sugar", the Chinese merchants we encountered were charming, intelligent and skilled bargainers. All of them carry calculators. (We learned that in their teenage years many Chinese choose Anglicized names. One guide called himself Andy because he said, "A is the first letter in the alphabet, so people will remember me better.") The merchants there present a stark contrast to the Chinese I've encountered in the Cascais shops.



Sign spotted in Shanghai.

In addition, the merchandise here is inferior to what we saw in China. Why, I'm still not certain.

Shanghai had an earthy and chaotic feel while Beijing seemed more controlled and cool in temperament with its imposing buildings, business like people and impressive historical sights. On one taxi ride from the outskirts of Beijing into the city I thought I was in LA. In addition, the city seemed spotless, perhaps sanitized for the summer Olympics. We saw the famed Cube and Bird's Nest but were told they were temporarily closed. What wasn't closed was Tiananmen Square where a huge picture of Mao

looms over the crowds. Before we entered the Square our local guide, Angie, told us to curb our political questions and conversations. Even on the bus she was reluctant to give us very thorough explanations of the events of 1989. Regarding censorship, I'd also been told that in China, 'Googling' the 3 T's: Tiananmen Square, Tibet and Taiwan would yield nothing. I did manage to find links to all three topics but when I clicked on them, a 'Server Not Found' notice dominated my screen. In general, though, we were free to talk openly about most topics with no fear at all. Tibet was an exception, but I'll save that for a later column.

It's often the offbeat that one remembers more than the historic sights. As we exited the Square, three of us women on the tour told Angie that we needed to use the rest room. Inside we encountered 500 women, mostly Chinese, crammed into a room with about 30 stalls containing Asian squat style toilets. We waited in separate lines, like at Jumbo, each hoping that ours would open up first. Finally, Peggy's line, next to mine, started to move. The Chinese women signaled to her that they were going in two at a time, and Peggy did the same! (Happily, the women in my line did not adopt the same strategy.)

I keep a list of "must do's before I die" and walking on the Great Wall of China has always been one of the top items. The tour group visited the Wild Great Wall, a remote, and apparently authentic and unreconstructed section, but a part not accessible for long walks. I passed on that tour and instead walked on the Mutianyu section, 73 kilometers northeast of Beijing. Don and I hired a taxi driver from the hotel who took us there and waited for 6 hours as we ascended the wall in gondola like

vehicles, walked for 3 hours on narrow stones and climbed up and under tunnel like structures. Coming down consisted of steering individual toboggan seats through the twists and turns we'd passed on the way up to reach the Wall. When we finally got down I panicked momentarily as I couldn't locate the driver. Then we saw him, smiling and asking about our adventure.

Tip: If you go on a tour be sure to do advance research and assume some responsibility for your sightseeing. After three days at home, I broke my mid-trip resolution and went out for Chinese food. The owners, who came from near Shanghai, were delightful and seemed surprised that I could say "Hello" (Ni hao) in Chinese. However, I didn't tell the eager to please proprietors that the dumplings just didn't taste the same...

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Next column: Xian (Farmer Home Stay); Chengdu (Panda Sanctuary); and Tibet

Oporto, no oil

Having lived in Portugal for 17 years and seldom gone any further north than Lisbon I was actually quite excited when the opportunity to do some 'work' in Oporto arose. Yes, it would entail a pretty long drive and yes, it would be considerably cooler than the Algarve, but you can't live in Portugal and not visit one of its most charismatic cities, can you? Car packed, tank full, directions in hand (passenger's, not driver's), off we went to find out if Oporto had more to offer than just Port.

Six and a bit hours later (including a few stops on the easily negotiated motorways for relieving and refilling) and there it was: Portugal's 'Second City', piled grandly on the north bank

of the River Douro, sitting proudly across one of six bridges that cross the waters and give the city its nickname 'City of Bridges'.

Now the best way I can describe Oporto is by comparing it to a Monet masterpiece; looks

very impressive from a distance, but up close it gets a bit, well... messy.

What from a distance looks like charming, colourful townhouses, built neatly in rows with some sort of uniform organisation, up close are actually incredibly nar-

