

China October 4-21, 2004
Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Guilin, Xi'an
(Exchange rate: 8 Yuan/RMB for \$1US)
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Tuesday, Oct 5, 5am

What a wild start to the adventure in China. We had a very hard landing at the airport on our 747. A few luggage racks even popped open. None the worse for wear, though. Landed well in advance of our planned time which was fine.

Met Ingrid from Germany and Ralph from the US on the plane. They were in China to study the language and had already done so for a year. They were kind enough to give us a guide card so we had the names of places.

Upon exiting the airport customs area, we were accosted by taxi touts. One guy wouldn't go away and followed us for 1/2 hour. We made the mistake of acknowledging him and then he became persistent. We go into a cab they were trying to negotiate 200-380 Yuan/RMB (Y). Ha! That's ridiculously high. We went back into the airport hall, hid with some American tourists waiting for their guide and they gave the advice to pretend those people weren't there. Completely ignore them.

Hiding past the outside gate 13 by the toilets, we collected our wits; we found the price should be 85Y in the guidebook.

Okay, the trick is to walk past the pimps and to the middle three lanes were the long row of taxis are. Green uniformed military guys are there. Black, nice vehicles will cost 130Y plus 10Y airport fee to get to Tiananmen Square. Make sure to point to "Go fastest route" in the language book, otherwise the driver drives very slow, milking you for every Yuan.

Go to Tiananmen square about 7am after crossing under the street. This place is huge! Tons of Chinese tourists, 50 meter long kites, people hawking junk like postcards, stamps, Mao books, kits and such. Dong (my school friend) was right - people stared at us intently. Even caught a uniformed guy who was marching around staring at us. Apparently we stood out. But then, he caught himself and quickly looked back at where he was going.

There is a public toilet to the east of the square, near the Olympic countdown sign, under the museum. It's free. Patty had her first trauma of the no doors, hole-in-the-ground toilet. She made it okay but it was a new experience under the belt.

We have come during National/Golden week, so there are tourist things in Tiananmen square that normally aren't here. Quite a sight.

Everyone here snacks on massive bread loafs. One lady couldn't keep her eyes off Patty. Haha! Had another taxi tout episode. "50Y meter, 40Y no meter", said the driver. What a load of baloney. We got a ride to the Hilton Beijing from Tiananmen square for 23Y. Don't even bother trying to negotiate; even Chinese get ripped of doing it as I was told by a Chinese lady at work.

The driver laughed when I handed him a 100Y to break. The ATMs here put out 100Y notes. You need to break those suckers down quickly otherwise it's like going to McDonalds and buying small fries with a hundred dollar bill. Got to our hotel room early. Found out that "Hilton Honors" club saved us a lot of money.

We changed, showered and struck out for a meal. We ran into some communication challenges immediately. I was asking about the pricing of a dish of duck livers (I don't know why) and accidentally said "Okay" to Patty about something else and ended up ordering a dish of duck

livers. If the waitress types something into the computer when you're talking to someone, you've just ordered whatever you said "Okay" to. Pay attention!! The server also stands by the table the whole time waiting for you to order, so don't feel pressured. I think that was our mistake. It was about 68Y (\$7 US). I should have found "I'm very sorry" in the phrase book. We made the mistake of insisting that we didn't order something which embarrassed the waitress, not allowing her to save face. She became mad, threw the plate on the table and stormed off. That was probably her days wages sitting right there. We quickly finished off our meal and left. We won't be able to go back there and I won't get my fried scorpions now.

Got pulled into an artist hall inside the Hilton and got the tour. Small paintings were \$25/200Y. We bailed, even though we saw paintings we liked. Don't want to haul those around China!

The smog in China. Wow. The smog here is crushing. The sun is orange, even in mid-day. The photos with blue sky that I have seen must be after a rain shower.. You can't even see the sunset from the hotel, Hilton Beijing, 15th floor. And we face west! It looks as though there is a nearby forest fire. Buildings right across the street look hazy, as though they are three miles away.

Need to go buy the train tickets to Shanghai!

We found it easier to ask the hotel to write Chinese characters for directions to tell the taxi where to go. We got a card to take us to the Oriental Plaza at the base of the Hyatt. In the food court there, a dizzying array of foods was available. You go buy a debit card to purchase food here, say meat with noodles and then go get the change off the card. Neat! It cuts the money handling down to one place. The food is good here, not too spicy but very rich. A small coke was 4.5Y, about \$0.50. For a filling meal, it cost 23Y (\$4) for food and drink for the both of us.

The guards at the gates of Tiananmen Square shove people out at 10pm with the little guys in green military uniforms doing the pushing. The military guys walk up, say "Hello!" loudly and then cram you along like cattle. The square is actually quite beautiful at night, as it's extremely well lit.

Crossing the street here is a dance with death. Bikes, cars and busses disregard stop lights incessantly.

The fountain in the middle of the square is beautiful in the evening.

We took a taxi back to the Hilton, 24Y, washed the clothes and crashed out asleep.

Wednesday, Oct 6, 2004

After great fiddling with clothes and such, we head down to what we later discover is a Chinese Kentucky Fried Chicken for breakfast. You wouldn't know by the menu but only by the color and graphics used on the small sign outside the place. Even Col. Sanders is made to look Chinese. Quite funny but there is no crispy chicken to be had at this place. The food we chose was a little strange for breakfast but it worked.

As we walked back north toward the Hilton, there was a big hubbub around a canal we crossed over. Just as we began crossing the bridge, Patty got a good look at a floating dead guy in the water. I missed it because we were getting directed away from the scene by police. We stood and gawked for a few minutes and then headed back to the hotel.

Caught a taxi around 11am to the Forbidden City east gate through a gauntlet of people to buy the ticket out of busses used as ticket booths. We ran in and saw the first few temples. You can't go in them but can only view them from behind a large fence. Too many people were crowding in I guess.

There were huge urns, maybe 5 feet tall, all around the place to hold water in event of fire in the ancient times. Each urn had a fire ring below it to keep the water from freezing in the winter time.

The day was rather warm, probably from the smog, and felt like 80 degrees. Summer here would be unbearable if it's hot like this in October.

We checked out the Imperial jewelry exhibition. You can't pay extra for that one. The actual exhibit was small but the collection was impressive. Even the sword labeled "The Sword of Mystical Sharpness" was funny to see.

The Forbidden City is as large as they come. It makes Versailles look like a doll house. As you're walking along, everything is named the "Gate of -blank-". I commented that we were going to find the Gate of Forever Walking next. Hahaha! You DON'T want to come here when it's hot - you'll suffer greatly. The air is stagnant and smoggy.

Had the biggest cup of noodles ever for 6Y just east of the jewelry exhibition. The little market even has hot water for you. A bottle of water is 4Y. Got ripped off for postcards at 24Y (\$3) for 10. Later discovered that those generic card packs can be had for 5Y or less. Never pay more than 5Y for those things.

Visiting the Forbidden City entails massive walking; more so than any other place because everything is on such a grand scale. Yes, there is probably just less than the speculated 10,000 rooms in this city.

To dispose of junk hawkers, catch their glance, put your hand up in their face to stop and keep walking. Just don't let your glance linger. That works 70% of the time. But, saying "Okay" means "Yes, I want to buy that." In America, "Okay" just means acknowledgement of communication. Not in China! It's funny because people also loudly say "Hello" to you a lot. Quite funny. Tourist areas are loaded with people, regular streets are not.

We have been approached four times now (2nd day) to view someone's calligraphy or art, even at the Hilton. These people usually say they are practicing their English and you are coaxed into another gallery.

We had dinner at the Oriental Plaza under the Grand Hyatt. Good food again but very spicy. Dinner for both of us was 16Y (\$2) and drinks were 4Y. This was real Chinese food, too.

Taxis from Tiananmen to the Hilton were 23Y in a 1.60Y/kilometer taxi, as there are variously rated priced taxis. Each taxi always starts the meter at 10Y just getting in.

We washed some clothes and got to sleep.

Thursday, October 7, 2004

Oct 7, Morning

I went by myself and tried to see the flag ceremony but got there too late. The traffic in front of the flag area and Tiananmen gate stops for it. Tons of people! So, I wandered around the back alleys to see how the other half lives. What a different world. This is where the real Chinese exist apparently. I wanted to explore more but wanted to get back to the hotel and get something to eat. Perhaps we'll see more, later.

Also saw the southern most gates of the Imperial Palace/Forbidden City. These things are huge beyond belief, bigger than anything I've ever seen. All of these city gates are huge. Monstrous, even. It must be like traveling in Egypt or something.

We had to pack up and get out of the Hilton, so we wandered near the Kun Lun hotel to a dumpy motel called the Home Inn with the same graphic as the Days Inn. It was 288Y (\$36) night, much cheaper than the \$108 per night we were spending at the Hilton.

Also bought our tickets to Shanghai at the Kun Lun hotel. Even though we weren't staying at the Kun Lun, I used our room number from the Hilton to pretend we were staying there so we could use their services as the Hilton didn't provide ticket service. The tickets for a soft sleeper (4 to a berth) for an overnight ride to Shanghai were 499Y (\$62). That saved an overnight stay so the tickets were effectively \$30. We also hired a car and driver to take us to the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall for 700Y (\$87) at the Kun Lun using the same fake room technique.

We took a taxi past the Hard Rock Beijing near the dead man canal to the KFC for breakfast. Quite good real Chinese dumplings. From there, we snagged a taxi to the Summer Palace for 44Y with a lot of slow traffic.

There were quite a lot of tourist junk hawkers there. If you purchase the basic entry fee, you can see many things but you will have to pay extra to see some of the other sights in the palace. Since we were going to only going to spend 1/2 a day here, we paid the basic entry cost of 30Y and pay as we went, taking the "risk". Going in, we found a pond to sit next to and contemplate life. Too bad most of the pond plants were dead.

We wandered around for quite a while, seeing various temples, halls and greenery before getting to Suzhou Street. Quite an amazing little city inside the Summer Palace. It's all little tourist shops but it is cool anyway. Don't fall in the water - you can't get out for the three foot wall encasing the canal and water area. Had bean cord and noodle soup for lunch, 10Y.

Had to wander over the hill and way back to see the famous boat made out of marble, a crazy idea of the empress Cixi (pronounced Tserci) It's as far away and hidden as possible from the east gate. It's pretty awesome but with the dingy fog/smog, it's not as spectacular view as I've seen in photographs. Did do some shopping there. But there was no negotiating for a "discount" at these places. Weird! Apparently enough tourists pay full price here that the workers don't feel the need to discount.

Walked along the lake, saw the famous 17 arch bridge through the haze and escaped through the east gate. Did run into another guy "learning English" and we called him on it so he didn't try to sell anything but was honestly chatty; maybe could have gotten an email address, perhaps a missed opportunity? He was going to a Normal School for Teachers in Beijing.

Took the taxi back to the Home Inn motel after a run through the gauntlet of taxi touts. We were so tired that we didn't eat dinner and went to sleep.

Friday, Oct 8, 2004

The room was smoky all night from the neighbors. We woke up at 430am to go see the flag raising at Tiananmen square. It was odd to wait for the mad 515am rush to get into the place. If you didn't hurry, you'd have to stand the entire time. However, once you've chosen a sitting position, the green military uniform guys yell at you if you try and stand up. Choose wisely. We waited until 630am for the ceremony. It was very quick, the flag went up, the music played and it was over. Then you look back and see a sea of thousands of heads as far as you can see back. Wow. This is also a good time to catch the green military guys marching. They have precision like you wouldn't believe. Some of my photos show their hands streaking the exact same distance. They even ran over a woman who wasn't paying attention. Do not get in their way.

Oct 8, morning

Took a taxi back over to the Kun Lun hotel to catch our hired ride to the Great Wall. How did we use the Kun Lun's hotel services without actually staying there? We claimed room 1518 (our original Hyatt room number). Just make sure they don't have to call you in your room! We made sure to show up in plenty of time to change money (you need a passport to do this and they want to know your fake room number). A nice Austrian dude working for the hotel also helped us find some throat lozenges to cut the edge off the smog.

We rode in a Buick Century in style to the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall. Much more comfortable than a dingy taxi. Amazing traffic headed out of the city and wild sights. There are tons of people walking alongside the road who just wander in and out of traffic. We saw two car accidents, too.

It's about one hour to a Cloisonné factory, one unexpected stop, to receive a tour. At first I balked but it was part of the driver's day so we went along with it. The Cloisonné process is quite fascinating and horribly time consuming for the real deal. We learned how to spot machine made fakes, too. The real thing requires the shaping of the basic copper bowl, twisting and adding 100's of hand cut copper ribbons to that bowl, add enamel to the surface, fire it, sand, polish and gold electroplate it. The electroplating part isn't shown because it's a secret process. How in the world did the ancient Chinese electroplate without electricity? They figured out chrome plating in the Qin dynasty (the dude who built the Terra Cotta warriors), 2000 before it was rediscovered in Germany and America.

Patty and my English have actually been deteriorating due to the bad Chinese spoken English influence. It would be bad to come back home noticeably speaking worse than we had left.

Finished the ride to Mutianyu. At the exit of the Great Wall was a walk of tourist shots, just like Machu Pichu but a little shorter. At least at this section of the Great Wall, don't know about the more popular Badaling. We paid for the tram up, using our student IDs for a student discount. Nice to know that still works. Make sure to buy the slide ticket for the slide from the top of the wall to the bottom car area. The Lonely Planet guidebook is definitely wrong with this attraction; it's the best slide I've ever been on and well worth the cost. You pay more at the top, 40Y (\$5) but for that amount of money, you won't have a longer ride anywhere. It's much more fun than walking down 1000 non-descript stairs.

We rode up a comfortable tram to the top of the Great Wall. Nixon's quote comes to mind, "It's a great wall built by a great people." Hahaha! I jogged my way to the 20th reconstructed tower on this section of the wall to take a look at the original wall. It's disintegrating and quite dangerous. Only three tourist hawkers were on that entire section of the wall, much more pleasant than I've heard from the Badaling section. From the tram to tower 20, give yourself a good two hours for photographs and exploration. You can also purchase postcards for 4.5Y here.

Walked back and met up with Patty and we headed down the slide. Make sure not to leave your girlfriend for a significant time on the wall because she might not handle it too well...

Oddly, I didn't feel euphoria I expected seeing the Great Wall. It was fascinating and yet not mind blowing. It's probably too built up in everyone's head. It's cool, but it's not like seeing the Mona Lisa or leaning tower of Pisa for some. Also, the smog/fog was too dense to get the grand vista views in.

My mental image of the wall was seeing it stretch to infinity. That wasn't true and thus expectation didn't meet reality, causing slight disappointment, though unfounded. I expected to use my Nikon 70-300 lens to make wonderful compressed images but that was impossible with the fog. Perhaps that was my disappointment. The Great Wall was the entire reason I'd brought that lens to haul around China. It will stay home next time. The haze in the atmosphere might have actually been fog since the horizon was white and not brown.

Later in the day on the wall had the best views for us as the air was much clearer. Almost saw blue sky for the first time in days due to the higher altitude. Saw very few people, in fact having several sections of the Wall all to myself. I can see that going here on a weekend wouldn't be a pleasant experience and I can't imagine how Badaling would be.

We rode the slide down and ran through the "discount" tourist shops. Make sure not to miss the slide as it closes at 4pm. They wanted 60Y for a t-shirt! A rip-off for China, really. You have to bargain here and show them that their cotton shirts are thin and shrink horribly. Buy a shirt two times bigger than you normally wear because they're not pre-shrunk.

Talked to a couple and discovered that if one takes the 1.60Y taxis, it would cost 270Y to get you to Mutianyu and wait and then another 200Y back. Even though it's cheaper than our hired car of 700Y, the savings of 200Y wouldn't be worth the terribly uncomfortable ride. Make sure you don't lose the receipt for your driver, too. Everyone in China works with receipts and it's your only way out of tangles. Riding in the back of a Buick was infinitely more comfortable for a 2+ hour ride compared to a cramped red Chinese taxi.

We had the driver drop us off at the Oriental Plaza for dinner and sent him on his way. We saw the opening of an Italian designer clothing store next to the Hyatt and it was funny to see the Italian designer blabbing about his \$100 ties and \$1000 shoes in a country like this. We took a taxi back to the Kun Lun, seeing an interesting street vendor area of Beijing and then walked from the Kun Lun to our lowly smoky hotel. Using a big hotel is handy for getting around the city.

In the Home Inn, people smoke in the hall and it pours into your room. Gack! We discovered that the Chinese work on their skyscrapers 24 hours a day. No wonder they can put these things up so fast. It's loud. You need to bring earplugs to China because you need to keep the window cracked open to get air.

Sat, October 9, 2004

Had a super cup of noodles for breakfast to get the day going. Patty and I packed up our things and prepared for our last day in Beijing. We decided to hit up the Temple of Heaven today. Having checked out our room (costing us 290Y/\$36 per night), smoky and all making Patty catch a cold, we left our bags at the front counter and walked over to the Kun Lun to change some more money.

The doorman hailed a 2.00Y expensive taxi, we balked and requested a 1.60Y taxi. The doormen looked at each other and exchanged the words of "cheap!". "They can afford to stay here (\$160/night) and they want a cheap taxi??" Gotta have a little fun with the locals.

The Temple of Heaven (buy the 35Y through ticket otherwise you'll end up paying 80Y for individual tickets) was around 40Y. Once again this place is huge! Inside the main gate, you immediately need the first of four tickets, going south to north. The center of the first monument is acoustically designed so your voice echoes back to you. It's the strangest thing and quite fascinating. The cow/calf burning alters abound in this place and everything is in multiples of nine here. Stairs, stones, cauldrons - everything.

The second or third annex has an elliptically shaped wall that allows you to talk to someone around the corner of a building, like famous whispering chambers. You can't even see the person you're talking to across the courtyard and behind buildings. Several of the east/west side buildings request no photography as a note.

The main temple was huge. What a surprise. The Emperor's sedan chair looked like it weighed at least 500 pounds.

There was a great deal of construction going on for some big dance activity tomorrow. There was

lots of signage in French, too. We were both starving, so we didn't explore past 4pm and we caught a taxi back across the city. Good thing we did take off at that time because we ended up catching our train by only 12 minutes!

Rush hour in Beijing - you need 3 hours to cross the city both ways otherwise you won't make your destination. Perhaps we should have taken our backpacks with us.

The overnight train ride from Beijing to Shanghai was very pleasant, especially considering we were sharing a berth with one other Chinese dude, Dong Fan Fong. He was visiting Beijing for National Week and was heading home. He chose not to eat the dinner being served - local wisdom. I was so hungry I couldn't resist and ate the whole thing.

I had to put in my earplugs because there was just enough noise from the train motion to keep waking me up. This is the second time the earplugs have come in handy.

Sunday, Oct 10, 2004

The train into Shanghai. What's called the soft sleeper car was very nice. Since there were no private berths available, we had to take the four to a berth option, much better than the dorm style/hard sleep berths we heard about. It saves you a hotel night and you don't waste your time fiddling with airplanes and airport taxes. We will also be using the train to go from Xi'an to Beijing as well and I look forward to it.

But, I've read that it's very easy to end up with the wrong date for your train ticket. Before you say "okay" and seal the deal, write the date on a piece of paper so there is no verbal communication confusion. I made the mistake of ordering a verbal ticket at the train station and ended up with the Shanghai to Suzhou ticket on the 12-13th when we wanted the 13-14th. It didn't impact our schedule at all but it could have easily been a disaster. And that was at the English speaking window, too! I had a feeling the communication would be challenging. For the train from Xi'an to Beijing, there can be no mistakes.

Also, don't forget to reconfirm the flights from Shanghai to Guilin and then on to Xi'an 72 hours in advance. If you don't do this in China, they WILL cancel your ticket and resell it. I'm not sure why they do that but that's the system there and don't miss this critical detail.

We had one taxi tout try to get us to go to his hotel but he wasn't nearly as aggressive as the touts in Beijing.

We caught a taxi to the Peace Hotel on the Bund, a five star joint. Many heads of state have stayed there, including Clinton, Kissinger and other faces I recognized but couldn't name. Unfortunately they only had a suite available for 2100Y/\$262. Ouch. However, after calling around and finding all the hotels in the LP China book either having the wrong phone number or full, I quickly ran down to the lobby and got the room. The other five star option I found was much more expensive and probably not as fun as this place.

We had a very nice room with a separate living room with a door so I can entertain myself with Chinese TV while Patty sleeps off her cold.

I went down and set up the hotel in Guilin but couldn't get a hold of any place in Suzhou. I'm getting tired of getting into cities and not finding hotels because it's Golden Week. I'm breaking my rule but not having a place to stay in China isn't a good option. I hope to have more success tomorrow. The two weeks of Golden Week make a tiny bit of early planning more of a necessity.

I'm learning to try and get a hotel nearest to the center of the city as possible. It means less walking, shorter taxi rides and seeing interesting morning activities. Our next day's hotel (East Asia Hotel) is Shanghai's Golden Mile of shopping, Nan Jing Road. Hopefully it's good because

there are few places available here. (Later found out it was a rough place to sleep...)

Patty Slept while I wandered out to find some snacks for her. Need to do more of this wandering stuff because there's endless interesting opportunity. Picked up some tiny pastries to take the edge of hunger off and get going.

We went down to Yu Yuan Garden bazaar. Quite the shopping location, it's also on another ancient garden. However, you have to lean to divide the prices of things by 5x to get down to what the real price of things is. It's pretty fun to haggle with stuff like that. Even then, we're still probably paying too much.

We had an excellent dinner - it's easier to select food in the main food hall area. Just point to something and they cook it fresh for you right in front of your eyes so you don't have to worry about it. Though, you do have to pay 3Y for napkins here.

Yu Yuan Gardens is much more attractive at night than in the day, just like Shanghai itself. The haze left in the afternoon so we could see across the river and enjoy the view. What a beautiful city.

After enjoying the fancy jet powered bath with the coolest faucet ever, we were able to set up a hotel in Suzhou and headed off for our backup hotel. East Asia Hotel is a 2 star hotel. Didn't know you wanted to claim that. We dumped our stuff, found some lunch and took off for the Jade Buddha Temple.

Driving in Shanghai is even crazier than it is in Beijing. The drivers here seem much more motivated to drive faster and erratic. This seems like a much more metropolitan city than Beijing.

The Jade Buddha Temple was quite incredible. There were several large gilt Buddhas inside with people burning incense and praying outside, monks walking around and people tossing money into the various offering receptacles.

The actual Jade Buddha was quite stunning. It was adorned with thumb sized jewels and a jade pearl necklace, golden arm bands and various other adornments to make it a sight to see. They request that you don't take photographs in there and keep an eye on you. The rest of the temple was in stark contrast to the rest of super-modern Shanghai. You could enjoy a hundred year old temple while looking at a 40 story high-rise next door.

Leaving the temple, we did a little exploration around the Buddhist area. Unfortunately I'd tweaked my neck/shoulder this morning and was battling the starting signs of a cold so I wasn't in the best humor. But, we forged on in spite of my pain and Patty's being in the full throws of a cold.

The area around the temple is incredibly poor. People were doing their dishes in the gutter using gray water coming out of crusty hoses. Homes had no electrical lighting that we could see, dark caves of homes. A woman was sitting sewing on a late 1800's vintage sewing machine. A baby was pushing himself around in one of those hanging scooters, IN THE STREET, chewing on a moped while cars whipped by inches away. This was a gray area of life.

We've discovered that the panhandlers and beggars are more aggressive here than in Beijing. The younger mothers have their children in their arms and will follow you, trying to hit you up for money. You look like a walking wallet. We gave the lady a few Yuan but the lady kept pestering Patty because apparently it wasn't enough. That broke us on giving to beggars here, though it was a good way to get rid of heavy coins that dragged down your pants. Oddly, coins are circulated in Shanghai but are almost completely absent in Beijing.

Once we discovered that we didn't have the cast iron stomach to survive the food in the Jade

Buddha Temple district based on the sanitary conditions we saw, we caught a taxi over to Yu Yuan gardens to grab a less-likely-to-kill-you dinner.

We ate about the same thing we did the night previous - why mess with a good thing? It was 45Y for a filling dinner and 8Y for 2 orange sodas. Pretty good, though the food was still too oily and rich for Patty. I can live with it but it's strong. After a couple people started smoking next to us, we headed outside to look for some signature chop stamps.

Wandering around, I bought a coconut drink for 8Y. It was pretty funny because Patty, who'd lived in Hawaii, didn't realize that there is a hard shell outside and a fuzzy middle before you get to the dark hard center that you traditionally associate with a coconut. Hahaha! "That's tourist stuff", say says.

Jason and I learned to dispatch of the hard outer shell and husk of a coconut on parking sign poles while on the north shore of Kauai. Use a hard metal edge, bang it out and you'll get to the hard inner part of the coconut. Just like the people in Yu Yuan gardens did for you.

I didn't want to drink too much coconut milk for fear of its laxative effects. We got to the streets and looked for a chop vendor. The guy started at 120Y each. What a rip. We got him down to what we thought was 55Y for all three. That was a mistake.

We discovered that when negotiating, even for multiple items, you are always arguing about the price of the individual items. We were ready to walk away from the guy because he wanted 150Y for the three so we ended up settling on 60Y for the three. I had a pang of guilt because but I realized he's taken so many people with that maneuver that he'd easily make it up on another tourist. Sometimes you pay too much, other times you get away with great bargains. (As I later found out, I paid too much anyway.)

We took a taxi over to the Shanghai Grand Theater. What a ritzy place! Western toilets, paper towels, the whole deal. It never occurred to me to check out a Chinese acrobat show but it was good that Patty mentioned it when we were staying at the Peace Hotel and bought the tickets there.

It was a sight to see. If in Shanghai, this is the place to enjoy it. You will be amazed by the feats of strength and balance. The price for failure is a 20 foot spill to the stage with no net. One saw one minor flaw in a performer's balance but past that it was stunning. Well worth the 168Y each.

We caught a late night taxi back to the East Asia Hotel, downloaded the camera memory cards and went to bed. Sure hope the portable hard disk doesn't die.

Monday, Oct 11, 2004

Woke up about 630am totally wasted and hungry. There was a huge music party last night but fortunately it didn't last long. Showered up, packed our things and left. When leaving a hotel here, you must keep all the receipts they give you otherwise you can't get out. Keep them handy.

We caught a taxi to the train station from Nan Jing Road to the train for 13Y. There was a 2Y station tax you had to pay the driver, too. The waiting area was crowded and you had to push your way through the people.

We had the hard seat option and found it very livable. I wouldn't do it for a multi-hour trip like that, but Shanghai to Suzhou was only an hour so it was fine.

We had a delay of game because I couldn't find our hotel note cards in the growing heap of papers in my backpack. So, we caught a taxi to the Sheraton (standard rooms are 200Y) but they had no rooms. After more digging, I found the hotel cards. We're off!

We got to the (other) East Asia Hotel, costing 380Y for three stars. Gah! Oh well, that's the cut. The signs here have some very funny translations. We could start a business just translating stuff into correct English. Have to keep notes on those funny signs.

We discovered that what's called a non-smoking room at the East Asia means you don't smoke in the room. Previous visitors may have smoked in there; all the hotel staff does is remove the ashtrays, nothing more.

Fortunately, the room faces the garden and street and receives a breeze to hopefully combat the smoke. After some washing of clothes, we headed off for the "Garden of the Master of Nets". A short taxi ride (12Y) got us there. We had an excellent lunch of curry and bbq pork noodles. (Note - probably shouldn't eat pork in 3rd world countries). Probably the best meal we've had in China thus far! The service was great although we accidentally ordered Japanese style eggs made in China (blech) for 5Y extra. We learned to let it go this time and it was smoother. Heck, it's only \$0.62 so who cares. Gotta learn not to say "Okay" and not point to the menu at any time.

The garden was quite tranquil in spite of the two large tourist groups going through. Patty didn't like the garden very much because there were some weeds and dead things, no comparison to Japanese gardens apparently. I liked it because it wasn't as overwhelming as everything else in China. For the 15Y cost each, I could live with it.

After getting our fill of the garden, we stuck out in search of dinner. Right across the street from the Japanese place that we had lunch at (didn't even know it at the time), we ate at a Chinese hot-pot place. We finally get to enjoy one of the famous hot pots. These two food places are right at the alleyway entrance to the garden.

The meal is served with a basic broth starter and then you choose the things you want to add to it. We (finally!) discovered that you must confer on things on the menu without pointing to them and saying "Okay". We enjoyed the shaved chicken, Chinese cabbage, noodles and carrots. You put all the noodles into the pot and then only cook the others things as you eat them otherwise they'll boil into oblivion. We learned this by watching what other people were doing in the restaurant, my standard technique. The broth is boiled by a fire right on your table in a big bowl. This was the best meal we've had in China right next to the Japanese meal. Yum!

We wandered the district outside of the Master of the Nets Garden and found it to be a high-end hair salon district with prices up to 1200Y (\$150), a fortune for China. We tried to find Patty some hair mouse but the only bottle we found was for \$24! That wasn't going to happen.

We tried to catch a taxi to a beautiful canal bridge but ended up being dropped off in a very dark alleyway. We made our way through and out okay but it was an experience. Saw some people watching Chinese people at volume 10, loud as possible. After enjoying the home life, we caught another taxi and headed back to the hotel for some much needed sleep. Charged up batteries, downloaded and cleared memory cards and konked out at 830pm. Still fighting that damn cold. <sigh> Sick again in a foreign country. I hat that as it seems to happen every time. Stupid immune system.

Wed, Oct 13, 2004

Woke up, went down to reconfirm our flight tickets out of Shanghai to Guilin. You must do this 24-72 hours in advance otherwise you will be bumped off. We made sure to get some hotel cards to get back to the sights we wanted to see. We cleaned and packed, checked out of the Overseas China Hotel (380Y dump) and were off.

We've been paying cash for hotels because we've found that hotels here store your complete credit card information. Not a very attractive thing. Cash leaves no connection to your credit card

account.

We struck out without breakfast and I was a grouch for it. We taxied over to Old Town Suzhou to poke around. For 30Y, you can tour the place. We found the area to be pretty interesting but what we really found was the large barge traffic moving up and down the canal system.

Barges were hauling coal, bags, building rubble, really anything. There were even caravans of 20+ boats, being towed by one tug that itself was hauling junk, too. We videoed and shot a bunch o boats before heading off to explore Old Town.

Wandering around, we found all sorts of bridges, canals, boats, old buildings and they all were neat! Fired off quite a few shots, some of the old Buddha dudes plus some us shots. We finally found a cup of noodles from a street vendor and devoured that. Feeling a bit better, we looked around some more.

As our time was running short, we took a taxi over to the Garden of the Humble Administrator.

The garden was stunningly huge and much better kept than the Master of the Nets garden. For the 70Y it cost, it better be a good garden. The garden is 10 hectares (24 acres), has its own canal system keeping in theme with Suzhou, several ponds, endless walkways, Bonsai trees, woven bamboo everything - everything one would expect for such a large garden. As we wandered, there were many Chinese tourist groups. Asians really don't like to do anything by themselves, do they?

It's a beehive society rather than an individualist society. It's rather strange to me to want to tour around with a crowd but I'm strange to boot. Fascinating.

Running short on time, we ran through the junk peddlers and saw our taxi. Across Suzhou to our hotel, Patty was able to successfully communicate to the driver, "Wait - need to get luggage - go to train" while I ran in to get our things. We didn't want to loose this taxi because our time was tight. We hopped back into the taxi and perilously traveled back to the train station.

I cannot convey in words just how wild the traffic is here. We finally saw a car cut off a lady on a bike and she crashed into the side of it. The guy immediately got out and began helping her up. She held her head as I believe she hit it when she bounced off the side of the van. Loudly! She tried to get to her feet as quickly as possible because she knew just how dangerous and inattentive the traffic is here. We've seen countless bicycle riders go right through an intersection against the light, with children on their bike, without so much as a sideways glance. I thought Boston or Tijuana was the end all, be all traffic, perhaps New York. Those places are nurseries compared to what we've seen in China.

At the train station, we grabbed some muffin buns and waited. Our train was a little late but nothing too horrible. People really began stacking up because of the late train time. It all worked out and we rode soft seat back to Shanghai without incident. For 7Y more (22Y total), you get a wide body seat, not crammed into the person next to you. Very recommended, especially for a longer ride. Not that the hard seat option was bad but for a multi-hour trip, it would be another story. The T722 train goes to Suzhou from Shanghai and the T722 the other way.

Back in Shanghai, we got to our glorious East Asia Hotel, got a room and discovered that though it was a "non-smoking" room, which never stopped anyone from doing it. We tried to get another room but it had no windows so it was that much worse. Once the smoke starts pouring in through the door, we would have died. We opted for the slightly more stinky room but at least it had a window.

We ran over to Hotel Sofitel and begged them for a reservation. Patty was able to secure one after swearing and promising that we wouldn't ditch out on it. Believe me, we wouldn't. This way

we had something for the next night.

Afterward, I spotted a Subway sandwich place and we munched on some veggies there. It was a good idea because we hadn't had too many greens since we arrived here. It was nice not to have strong, greasy food for a change.

Unfortunately a loud band played until 130am, keeping Patty up even with silicone ear plugs. She's a light sleeper. However, I put my cheapo orange ear plugs in and never heard a thing. Good thing for being a log. It pays to be able to sleep dead to the world.

Thurs, Oct 14, 2004

Put Patty to bed at the East Asia Hotel (690 Nan Jing Rd, 280Y/night), while I went to set up the room at Sofitel and work on plane confirmation. We ended up with a superior room with a king bed for 1000Y. It was a non-smoking floor so it was well worth the cost. Went up and picked up Subway for lunch, went and got Patty up, packed up and moved over to Sofitel. Much nicer at 4 star hotels. There is a massive gap between the 2/3 star and 4 star hotels.

Discovered that all the phone numbers in the Lonely Planet China guide were wrong for the hotels in Xi'an, making it difficult to make reservations. I went to the business center and paid for them to set up reservations at the Bell Tower Hotel in the dead middle of Xi'an. It supposed to be a top end place and reasonable, 460Y/night, so hopefully those last few days won't be as rough on Patty.

Once we got everything set up, I put her to bed and I headed off for the Shanghai museum. It's located in People's Square (all things communist seem to be named the People's -something-), a very large concrete park with all sorts of shapes and figures. Shanghai architecture is some of the best I've seen in the world for modern designs. The buildings are all sorts of fascinating shapes, much better than the boring boxes at home.

The layout of the Shanghai museum is well laid out on four separate floors with two to five exhibitions per floor. Make sure to give yourself time to see the live China pottery demonstration as I missed it. I didn't take the audio tour as I only had 3 hours to blast through the entire museum. Found out later that the printed guide was informative for the first floor but not helpful for the remaining floors. Good thing I didn't shell out the extra 40Y for the guide!

The museum was building up an exhibition for the Terra Cotta warriors Dec 04 to Feb 05 so there were several dead halls. There was more than enough to see without those extra halls. The most impressive overall was the porcelain China exhibit. "Pottery is the world's but porcelain is China's." There was a stunning collection of 20th century B.C. pottery all the way to the best of Ming Porcelain China and on to modern designs. They even had a live exhibition of pottery making in the museum.

There were models of three different types of kilns including the "Dragon Kiln". Everything here is Dragon something. One kiln was able to achieve temperatures of 1200 degrees C with wood fuel oxidation reduction (they burned wood). Wow!

Shanghai museum had exhibitions of statues, coins, royal seals, clothing, furniture, bronze, porcelain, painting and calligraphy. Really quite extensive. Could have easily spent a full day there. Maybe one day in the future.

Grabbed some snaps of people and artifacts. Discovered Shanghai to be a very energy efficient city. Escalators slow down when not used and speed up when a person cuts a sensor beam. The light on the paintings, calligraphy and several other displays remain low until you step right up to the glass, tripping an IR sensor which increases the lighting level. Maybe 30 seconds later, the lights are dimmed again slowly to wait for the next viewer. Many of the pieces were bottom

and top lit so you could see the entire piece. I discovered later that even the main city lights along the Bund and Nan Jing road shut off at 1030pm sharp.

Once the museum music started playing at 5pm, the guards began shoving people out. I jogged through the last few sections as I saw the museum staff looking at their watches 20 minutes before the exhibits closed at 5pm. That was a good indicator that they would run things Chinese style and promptly end your visit.

Met people from Switzerland and Germany, on tour, learning Tai Chi for three weeks and at the same time are in town for a conference on urbanization. Quite a wide variety of people in the museum. Noticeably absent were big tour groups as I only saw a couple. Quite a nice change from the regular situation.

Being booted out of the museum, I snapped some more pictures of kids playing and headed off for dinner. Found a Megabite food mart in the mall and had a 16Y meal that was okay. There actually wasn't a lot of food in the meal, only a lot of broth. We ordered a smoothie drink but it came out totally wrong. Patty went and talked to the manager about it and the manager had the girl do the drink over again. Shockingly, the girl argued with her now angry manager the entire time she was remaking the drink. There was much less conformalism here than we had anticipated.

Patty was wiped out so we walked back to the Hotel Sofitel and put her to bed while I continued to explore the city, the last night in Shanghai.

I took a taxi over to the Bund and found the famous Bund tourist tunnel. Round trip from this side is 40Y. It was vaguely entertaining but more pleasant than a wild taxi ride. The tunnel would have been far more entertaining with its psychedelic lighting had one been on shrooms or some such thing.

The Shanghai TV tower is huge! Too bad you can't get next to or up it without paying an outrageous ticket price. Skipping that, I headed down the street to see the old Shanghai skyline from this side of the river. Beautiful! Old lit up buildings juxtaposed by ultramodern architectural monstrosities.

My time was running short so I again embarked on the psychedelic Bund tourist tunnel to the old side of the city to snap some more pictures of the Pudong side (where I just was with the TV tower). I was just in time as the main city lights were extinguished at 1030pm. Show is over! I walked past our first historic hotel, Peace Hotel, and went on down Nan Jing Road.

Nan Jing Road had been a centerpiece of Shanghai for 100+ years. It was bombed out by the Japanese prior to World War II. In 1999, Nan Jing Road was converted to a pedestrian only pathway. This gave rise to fake Rolex dealers, beggars and rich stores along this path. Up to Hotel Sofitel and sleep!

Fri, Oct 15, 2004

Up at 530am and out to breakfast at 630am. Hotel Sofitel in Shanghai has a nice Chinese and American buffet breakfast included in the price of the room. The omelet chef didn't arrive until 7am so we missed out on that one.

It was an uneventful taxi ride along Shanghai freeways to Hongquai airport, easy check in, no airport tax, they didn't even look at our passports, just the tickets, cake security and a one hour wait until boarding.

We road a shuttle bus over to our plane, up some stairs and we are on to our next destination, Guilin.

A rather uneventful plane ride. Always a little more scary because China has one of the worst air records in the world. That's why I've planned two train legs on this trip. We found our hotel name in Chinese in the Brick of Knowledge (Lonely Planet, China). From the airport to the city is 80Y. Naturally, the taxi touts were trying to get us to take a ride for 100Y. You just can't beat the meter. Once you know the system, you can avoid the basic scams. It's 30km from the airport to the hotel, about 40 minutes. Got to our hotel, the Osthmanthus, without incident.

Have discovered a strange pattern here. I found out that non-smoking floor was the 8th, we got a room on the 10th even though we requested non-smoking. We caught the house cleaning removing the ashtrays and prepping the room with air freshener. Went down to the reception desk and said the non-smoking room wasn't, that we found the 8th floor was. The girl behind the counter gave a blank stare and then the smile of "I'm caught". This scenario has played out three times at three star hotels. They say non-smoking and then try to bilk you. Unless you stay at four star or better, expect to be squeezed at every turn. The room was supposed to be 560Y but I asked for a discount and got 380Y. Again, with the weird smile. Strange country!

There is a massive gap between the 2/3 star places and 4 star. Huge.

We struck out for central square to find a place to eat. We wasted 1/2 hour trying to find an eat place in the mall only to discover that the food court was closed. Damn. The fall-back position - our first Chinese McDonald's. Patty ate a Big Mac and I had a fried chicken sandwich. Both were good.

Funny how McDonald's would actually taste good. From there, we wandered around, found some real food places to eat at, wandered some more and then enjoyed watching night descend on the streets of Guilin from our second story dinner location.

China is such an odd place. You'll note that the street is grid locked traffic. Then, go into a store for a little while and come out to discover that the traffic is all gone. In its place is a bicycle transported bazaar that has been set up in 1/2 hour. Incredible!

Sat, Oct 16, 2004

For the insanely low price of 10Y each, we were driven around in an air conditioned bus to the Reed Flute cave, Elephant Trunk Hill and Seven Star Park. We had to pay the admission to each of course (60, 35 and 30 respectively) and our good looking, partially English speaking guide kind of directed us to each place as best as she could. My school friend Dong was right about southern China women - they're much better looking than northern China.

Reed Flute Cave was stunning in structures and lighting. Even though it wasn't as big as Carlsbad Caverns, the Chinese lighting artists blow away the Americans. Red, blue, yellow, purple, flashing and lasers all light up the cave. They've got it all. Also, the way-too-fast tour guides use a magnetic ring to activate the lighting system as they walk by, preventing tourists from fiddling the lights. We blew off our tour guide to take a more leisurely pace but couldn't turn on the lights without the magic key. We just waited for another tour group to show up and they lit things for us. We expected to be shoved along but that wasn't the case. It took about 1.5 hours to explore and photograph the cave. The expected tour time is 40 minutes.

We caught up with our guide and bus driver and were off to Elephant Trunk hill. Like all things Chinese, this place was massive. Situated on a limestone outcropping, there was quite a bit to explore. We found a butterfly exhibit and enclosure with some large as dinner plate butterflies on exhibit. They also had huge and ugly beetles under glass from all over China. Real ugly. Unfortunately none of the explanations were in English, though.

Sensing our time was short, we headed through the Buddha cave and up to a peak, the Moon

Mist. What a view! You can see most of Guilin and the currently shallow Li River with fisherman patrolling it. It was quite humid making me feel bad. We only gave ourselves 12 minutes on the top looking around and had to rush back to our awaiting bus. We also picked up another passenger there, Mr. Wang Li Yue, a pleasant fellow. He was going to accompany us to Seven Star Park.

Is anything small here other than the Garden of the Master of the Nets? We found our way to Seven Star Cave (30Y) and went in. It's 1km in length and the size and lighting even blew away Reed Flute Cave. This one had water falls, though no inside lake. Many of the named imaginative structures could actually be visualized. You have to have an imagination for this one. It was a bit interpretive but fun anyway.

The cave even had its official junk and photo vendors inside of it! Haha. Truly Chinese. I'd take about an hour to go through with no photography time, otherwise it would be 2.5 hours.

After exiting the cave, Mr. Wang was able to guide us to Camel Hill Gate to meet our bus, otherwise Patty and I would have been hopelessly lost. Native language skills come in handy. Got Wang's email to email him the photos we took of him. We caught our bus and headed back to the hotel.

We learned never to eat a chili spicy cup of noodles on an empty stomach. You'll pay the price. We both woke up with bad gas pains.

I was feeling pretty bad so I went to sleep quickly while Patty stayed up and read. She didn't wake me up to go to dinner so she starved. She said it was my fault but she could have woken me up. I felt much better when I woke up but she wasn't too happy about it.

Sunday, October 17, 2004

Today is our big Li River cruise, 450Y each. The most expensive activity yet. Got bussed to the pier, 20 minutes farther along than usual because the water level is so low. As it was, we could see the bottom of the river from inside the boat. We ever scraped the bottom of the river three times.

There was an endless array of landscape scenery to be had. Tried using the 3 stop split grad to soften the difference between the misty sky and foreground and it helped out somewhat. As the day wears on, it becomes very difficult to view the LCD image. The histogram was much more helpful to gauge proper exposure.

Ran into water buffalo about 45 minutes into the 5 hour trip. I was blasting a bunch of shots thinking this was my only chance. Apparently these buffalo are all over the place so you have plenty of chances to get some good shots of them. Pick and choose to get the best ones. Now I wish I'd brought along my 70-300 lens as it would have been much more useful here than on the Great Wall. Got to see all sorts of people, some who waved back when I waved at them, too. Did see a few large birds but they were noticeably absent. Something I would have expected. Weird.

Lunch was pretty good, though I didn't eat the fish. Patty couldn't eat much so she continued her starvation diet. For the money, you can get a soda, fried crabs, shrimp and some other oddities. The most shocking item was the snake wine. A large jar with snakes suspended in the wine. I didn't have the courage or stomach to try it, though I'm sure it was fine. I just wasn't feeling up to speed so I passed. The Chinese guy sharing a table with us passed on all the food. Perhaps that was a hint as to the quality/poisonousness of the food.

We arrived a bit late in Yangshou, into a "Hello" hell of street and junk vendors. The only thing different here was this is the first place was saw t-shirts for sale. We had to come all the way to

Yangshou to find t-shirts. Weird place, this China.

I made the critical mistake of losing our tour guide dude. The directions to the bus were vague at best, as I missed the pedestrian pathway to go to the bus depot. It was a turn down a dark little alley that anyone could have missed. We walked up and down the river three times trying to find it but to no avail. Fortunately, a western tour guide took pity on us and gave us specific directions on how to get to the depot. He told us of the very-easy-to-miss alleyway that leads to the bus pickup point.

Once we found the alley, we were able to make our way to the bus staging area. We were 25 minutes late from our appointed departure time. Way too late in China.

I'd hoped to bum a ride on another bus to Guilin and discovered it was easy. Not a tour bus, mind you, but the country bus.

For 10Y, you get to ride back to Guilin on a bus packed with people hanging out the windows and sitting on stools in the aisle way. We picked up and dropped off many people along the way though there were no marked bus stops. Again, this is just something you have to know.

We finally reached the drop point in Guilin, some random point in the city as far as we were concerned. Patty made the critical mistake of not using the bathroom on the boat and paid the suffering on a 2 hour bus ride having to go. I couldn't coax her into using the bushes before we took off from Yangshou. It was a suffering mistake.

We finally found a 2-star hotel to use their bathroom. She came out crying because the floor was so grimy and gross from human waste, inside the hotel! I comforted her and gave some hand sanitizer. Don't touch those boot laces.

We finally found a taxi back to the central square of the city for another exciting McDonald's supper.

Back at the hotel, we cleaned up, washed our clothes and put Patty to sleep. Not being tired, I wandered off. If you're in Guilin, go down to the canal by the Osmanthus Hotel and enjoy a Chinese hoe-down with music, people singing and dancing. Old dudes in the pavilion were singing and playing their Chinese can and stick instruments, too. Guilin is quite an awesome place!

Mon, Oct 18, 2004

We overslept and missed the buffet at 7-830 so we ended up paying for breakfast.

Don't get a female taxi driver in China. They are not aggressive enough here compared to the guys. This particular one would hit the brakes and slow down to 20mph when she saw a vehicle near the side of the road 300 feet ahead. It was stressful, more so than with the crazy drivers.

We ended up making the airport with plenty of time to spare anyway, 20 minutes. No room for error but that's the way things have worked out. There was no airport departure tax. We boarded our plane and headed for our next stop, Xi'an!

A dude was in my seat on the plane. After some discussion, we discovered he was on the wrong flight. It was easy to have happen with the lax security here. He moved real quick once he realized his error.

Got to Xi'an with no excitement on a 2 hour plane ride. We took the shuttle bus, 25Y, to the Bell Tower hotel. I thought I somehow lost my pullover on the bus. I'm usually paranoid about that stuff and spent an hour trying to locate it to no avail.

We got the basic room at the Bell Tower Hotel, 4 star, for 480Y, usual price was 580Y.

Got dinner at the hotel, the first that served western food. It was a nice change though I tried the Chinese buffet anyway. Water bottles in the hotel were quite expensive, 0.6L bottles being 10Y each! Most expensive ever. On the street, these same bottles go for 3Y each. Patty wasn't feeling well and started showing signs of traveler's diarrhea. I gave her half an Imodium pill to help calm things down. Hopefully she's better tomorrow!

Tuesday, Oct 19, 2004

Patty's birthday. Too bad she had more bowel issues this morning. Gave her a full dose of Imodium and it fixed her right up.

We bought our train tickets to Beijing, Tang Dynasty dinner show tickets and got our personal driver to the Terra Cotta Warriors. We chose to go see the Warriors instead of the Panda tours which I suspected would distress Patty for the poor living conditions they're purported to live in. Plus I heard the tour was just too freakin' fast. Maybe I'm too slow. We enjoyed the convenient but expensive (68Y) snacks at the hotel.

We enjoyed a street lunch of dumplings and noodles for 9Y that we shared since it was quite a bit of food. We had trouble ramming it down the hatch. We'd seen this food place on the way to the museum and walked back there.

Explored the Shanxi history museum for 35Y. Even though the Lonely Planet China says it's a big to-do, I was disappointed. It had an impressive collection but the layout was poor and most of the space wasn't utilized. The stands for the items were dirty and the explanations in English had many misspellings. If I hadn't seen the Shanghai museum, it wouldn't have bothered me.

The thing that bothered me the most were the junk pushers INSIDE the museum. They were aggressively selling things just like street vendors. That was a shameful thing for a museum. We discovered that all the museum tours (you don't have to take one) were shoved through the junk area. There were "Hello" people pushing trinkets all over the place. The pieces in the museum were good but everything else was bad.

We caught a taxi to the area where the Tang Dynasty dinner show was to take place and bided our time before the show by wandering around the city in that area. Not much really going on other than construction.

The dinner show is incredible, very showy, colorful and melodic. There were samples of famous musicians playing on now ancient instruments, acts, and everything. The egg-centered chocolates were gross but I had to try them. (I can't remember what we did for dinner but I didn't note anything 1.5 years ago so it couldn't have been bad). Do spend the money to go see this show.

Wednesday, Oct 20, 2004

Last full day in Xi'an. Going to do the big assault trip - Big Goose Pagoda, Terra Cotta Warriors, Qin's Mausoleum and the Hot Springs. We powered down another 68Y buffet breakfast. I haven't been feeling well or hungry the past couple of days, so I did my best. It's very annoying.

We got our driver at 830am and we were off. We rode in a VW Passat for 400Y each.

The first stop was the Big Wild Goose Pagoda. It was similar in design to the Jade Buddha temple, with a 100+ meter tall pagoda built up over the centuries. It had a nice garden surrounding it. We didn't bother actually going up into the pagoda. We knew we'd both be

wasted from the walk up it so we skipped. There were tons of tour groups wandered the grounds so you had to wander a bit to enjoy the solitude. We lost our driver for a bit because we didn't set a time to meet. Mistake. Use your watch if you don't have pen/paper and show him the time you want to meet by setting the alarm time. Works quite well.

The next stop was the terra cotta warrior factory. It was fascinating to see how the figurines were made and how they're pressed hollow, put together and such. The color of them before and after firing is totally different, too. We saw a silk carpet, 12 feet long, 2 feet wide for 860,000Y (\$100,000US)!!! Probably took a decade, maybe a lifetime to make. They had beautiful furniture, too. But the prices at the factory were 2 to 4 times higher than other places we'd seen.

Off to the Terra Cotta warriors. Entrance was 90Y. What a walk from the entrance to the warriors. We missed the little cart train for 5Y. Pay it.

The first building you come to is Pit 1. No map was provided with you entrance so you had to figure these things out. Some Europeans even asked us where to go, too, so we didn't feel like we missed out. The only restroom we found was to the left of the Pit 1 building, if you are facing the entrance. Unfortunately the restaurant was full of tour groups so we weren't able to get a meal. Dang. Probably good since our time was short but wandering around hungry isn't fun, either.

It was neat to see the Qin Dynasty's silent army in Pit 1. The building is stupidly huge, maybe 0.2 miles long? I don't know. It's so big that the other end of the pit looks hazy. It's that far away.

Pit 2 is still under excavation so you can see some of the work going on. Quite fascinating to see how all that work is done.

Pit 3 is even smaller but there are some other odds and ends in there. We were warned by the Lonely Planet guidebook that photographs may be forbidden. When we got there, it was no problem at all to photograph. Things were too far away for flash so I just used the railing around the pits to get shots.

We then went over to check out the museum. Make sure you see all the pits before the museum otherwise you won't know what the descriptions are referencing. Inside the museum, see the warrior exhibition and then the gold exhibit. You'll find English explanations of everything and how the gold was used. We even found an example of a 2,000 year old chrome plated sword. Americans and Germans didn't discover this until the 1940's. Somehow the Chinese got it two millennium earlier. Unfortunately we only had 2.5 hours to see the entire place and had to get back to our driver. It was just as well anyway because the only other food place we found was closed.

On the way out, the junk vendors would take a US dollar for anything but wouldn't take twice the amount in Chinese money. Bring lots of \$1 bills, they'll take you far. Found our driver and headed off.

We skipped the Qin mausoleum because we didn't want to walk up a hill to see and open hole in the ground. By all accounts, it was likely the most impressive mausoleum of the ancient world, besting the Egyptians. The day was burning on and we were starving.

We stopped at a place and had another restaurant rip-off episode <sigh>. This time the food served was just fine but the prices were in Chinese so I didn't know how much they were charging. (English menus always have higher prices for the convenience). Big mistake. It was strange because the people here must never see foreigners as several of the staff stared at us the entire time. It was fun enough. When I used the restroom, the outside waiting room was curiously full of eager onlookers. We might have been the first westerners to visit their place in a year.

Once we were done being stared at and finished eating, we went to pay the bill. The girl took a long time to calculate 2 plates and drinks. She said the price was 59Y!! What?! I stupidly handed over money while Patty asked the driver in Chinese number hand signals about the price. The driver had a shocked look and then started yelling at the girl, embarrassing her that we caught her farce. After a little yelling, the girl reluctantly handed back a 20Y bill. Patty handed the money back with a "We don't need the money, we know what you're doing" look. Oh, did that insult the girl. Didn't let her save face on this one.

By this time, four dudes in suits appeared out of nowhere and we realized it was time to leave. Now. We didn't want to get into a fight with a bunch of Chinese guys that we didn't know anything about.

Now I know you can be duped anywhere in China, you have to watch every price. Our driver was thoroughly embarrassed over the incident and apologized profusely. Ultimately, it was funny and educational so it didn't bother me at all.

We went to the Xi'an hot baths and enjoyed the garden though it was freezing and I had lost my jacket. We paid 5 Jiao (1/2 a Yuan) to touch the hot springs water. This is a pay as you go place for sure. One of the buildings still had bullet holes from a 1938 fight with the old guard and revolutionaries. Cool! The bath buildings house entire Olympic size pools, though empty, too. Seeing time short, we headed back to grab our driver.

Our ride back to the Bell Tower Hotel was the usual wild roller coaster ride on China roads. Xi'an has the roughest roads we've been on. This made the drive to the Great Wall seem pleasantly smooth.

Back at the hotel, we gathered our wits and braved McDonalds one more time. I tried a Big Mac and remember why I haven't eaten one for a decade. Yuck. We brushed, showered and bedded down for the night.

Thur, Oct 21, 2004

Last day in Xi'an before catching the overnight train back to Beijing. Got up at 6am and wandered around the waking city by myself. Headed over to the Drum Tower and down the alley of shopping toward the Great Mosque. It's fun to watch a city awaken, from empty alleyways and streets to the raw insanity that is China.

Grabbed some Chinese-Muslim food, observed sheep carcasses in various states of preparation and enjoyed the early morning with no junk peddlers. Most of the people didn't take notice of me, either.

In the morning light and shadows, I look like everyone else here, some tall Asian guy wandering around with a camera. Don't like to stick out to the point that people take an active interest in me. Much easier to observe when you don't affect the experiment. Even saw a blind guy standing outside a Chinese school for the blind in one of the alleys near the Mosque.

Met up with Patty and we enjoyed another 68Y Chinese/American breakfast buffet. My stomach has been rumbling since Monday so I still didn't eat a lot. Too bad since the breakfast is really good, though expensive for China, and I need the energy. It's tough when you're force feeding yourself good food.

Packed up, checked out and left our baggage so we could do our China shopping assault on the last full day there. Always do the for-other-people shopping the last day if possible. Much less to carry around.

Got a China tea set for my friend Esther down from 380Y to 160Y (\$20US) with a ton of negotiating in the back room down a dark alley in an unknown place. It was a nice set and we haggled for over ten minutes but we did the walk away maneuver and the owner broke. The box was covered in dust and had probably been there three years so I didn't feel too bad. Some people wouldn't negotiate down to the true \$1 value of some items but remained at \$5 (40Y). Crazy. We discovered later that many tourists never haggle on price so the shop owners know they can get it. Crazy.

Dragging our shopping laden bags, we sampled some squished persimmons with various fillings, buckwheat noodles (blech!) and Chinese sweets - not sweet by American standards.

Love what Chinese can carry on their 3 wheel bikes or a cart attached to a bicycle. One guy was carrying 10, yes 10, couches on his bike chariot. Crazy!

Grabbed our now onerous load of things from the hotel and headed to the train station. We hung out in the soft seat waiting lounge until train time. We were bunked with two guys, one older, the other middle age. We discovered (much to our dismay) that for 768Y, we could have had our own private, two person berth but we didn't know it was available until too late. Oh, how I wish I'd known.

We got the pleasure of people smoking in the berths in the car instead of in between the cars where they were supposed to. In America we press rules much harder than other places.

The younger guy in our berth snore louder than the sound of passing trains, the older guy drank a ton of tea before bed and got up at least five times in the night to use the restroom, waking everyone. This train ride was definitely not as smooth as the one from Beijing to Shanghai. Patty basically didn't sleep and I only got two hours in. I would have paid in an instant for the luxury car for the suffering we paid.

In the morning, Patty enjoyed some salt rubbed into her wounds. The older man knocked over his full tea jar onto Patty, soaking her. While she was coughing and hacking from the smoking in the car. What a freakin' circus. We'd had enough, so we assaulted the train door and got out of there, blew off the taxi tout idiots and found a taxi to the Hilton Beijing.

An hour across the city for 48Y, we arrived at Hilton Beijing. We told the desk clerk that we'd stayed in room 1518 three weeks ago and to please hold our bags. Since we had stayed there, they graciously let us use their services. Very nice. We changed clothes in the lobby restroom and went on to eat a great breakfast for 139Y. It was worth it. Both of our stomachs were still bugging us. We took some drugs and started feeling much better afterwards.

We took a taxi over to Tiananmen Square to buy some stuff and fly kites, harass junk dealers, see the inside of Tiananmen Gate and enjoy our last day here.

What a shock - Beijing was not coated in a thick blanket of smog. We actually saw the sunrise and sunset. It was like being in a completely different city. All the land marks looked so different that we had difficulty determining exactly where we were. A welcome change. Apparently a storm had blown through and rained all the smog out of the air. I always wondered how people got blue sky photographs of that place. Now I know.

We took a taxi back to the Hilton for the last time, collected our heap of stuff and grabbed a taxi to the airport. As usual, our driver tried to scam us out of money going to the airport, but after three weeks here, we were wise to his actions and didn't get taken for anything.

It took 1/2 to check in and the flight reconfirmation from the Xi'an Bell Tower Hotel worked flawlessly. Patty spent the last of the Chinese money and we were off on the plane.

Fri, Oct 22, 2004 - LAX

Looks like we arrived a good half hour early so our ride from Alfonso won't be here for a while. Patty basically kissed the floor at LAX and promised to hug her toilet when she returned home. Too bad I don't have a Snickers bar right now to take away the hunger pains.

Epilogue, April 20, 2006

After a year and a half has passed, I look back on my China trip with great fondness. It was an excellent trip to China and I learned a great deal about the culture there a little about myself, coming back changed in my perception of the world. When ever I think I have it bad, I remember that I'm not living in a half-collapsed brick building in a dingy part of Shanghai with no lights in my house, using gray water out of an ancient hose to wash my dishes in the street gutter.

It was incredible to see the sights I'd heard about growing up. Everything in China is large. We had planned to visit the Three Gorges River on this trip but do to 100-year flooding in that region; we skipped out and did this itinerary instead. For Patty's sanity (and consequently mine), it was probably a good thing because that plan was much more challenging than our city tour.

From what people have related to me, China has changed a great deal and will change even more soon. The amount of construction there is mind boggling. Everywhere you look, tower cranes are putting up high rises in every city we went to. There were clusters of cranes in the middle of nowhere as we discovered riding the train. China is growing and changing fast. Go see it before it converts from the old way to the new. Language is a barrier to travel there but don't let that deter you. You will discover many generous and helpful people along you way.

Note: Tuesday, Oct 12th didn't disappear, I just lost track of days while in China.