

China Travel Journal – Volume 1

Thursday, June 28, 2018 - Flight to Beijing, China

We were picked up this morning at 4:15 am for a 6:15 am flight to Detroit where we changed planes for a direct flight to Beijing. In Detroit we experienced the future of Big Brother surveillance, where we boarded the plane based on facial recognition, without the need of a boarding pass. It was practically instantaneous, and the camera knew exactly who we were and that we were on that flight. Pretty cool, and a little scary.

Friday, June 29 - Beijing

We arrived in Beijing, a city of about 30 million people, the following afternoon and made our way to our hotel. Jerry and Maxine (my brother and sister-in-law) arrived after us. We were in a daze after not sleeping for way too long. Nevertheless, we met up with Marcus, a friend of Jerry's from Philip Morris who manages the China market. He took us to a local restaurant for dinner, which included Peking Duck (of course) and other Chinese specialties.



Peking Duck 1



English. We visited with an award-winning artist at his home and bought our obligatory paintings of flowers and birds from him, then went to another house in the Old City where we painted kites in preparation for a kite flying expedition the next day. Dinner was at a local Chinese food restaurant, which included Peking Duck (of course) and other Chinese specialties. Notice the pattern?

Saturday, June 30 - Beijing

Stanley, our Beijing guide, picked us up for a full day of touring. We visited Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City and the Old City. Since it was 100 degrees, we felt right at home except for the lack of Westerners or the sound of





Sunday, July 1 - Beijing

Stanley picked us up in the morning for a visit to the Great Wall of China. It's about a two-hour drive with a stop half way at a jade factory for the tourists to get the hard sell. We held strong and left after learning about jade production, using the clean restrooms and not purchasing anything. We walked a while on the Great Wall, learned a bit of history, and rode the toboggan to the bottom. Because a visit to the Great Wall of China won't be complete without a toboggan ride. Back in Beijing we attended a Kung Fu/dance show, then shopped at the Silk Street center. Silk Street was

a popular shopping street, but the crowds made the nearby US Embassy uncomfortable, so the Chinese government built a six-story building and relocated all the merchants into the building. Bargaining there is the norm. Among other things I purchased a pair of Oakley sunglasses that they made into my prescription in literally ten minutes at a fraction of the US price. We never did get to the kite flying.

Monday, July 2 - Beijing and Xi'an, China

Our morning started with a visit to the Temple of Heaven, where emperors from the Ming and Xing Dynasties spoke to their god. We then had a Tai Chi lesson in the surrounding park. We learned the basic Stroke the Tail of the Peacock move, though my rendition looked more like Grab the Tail of the Tiger. Then on to the airport for a flight from Beijing to Xi'an, a city of 8 million people. There's always one jerk on the plane watching videos on his phone without headphones, and he sat next to me. To make matters worse he was farting and burping prodigiously. I had to aim my air conditioning



vent to create an air current blowing away from me. Faced with a choice of lack of air or breathing in some guy farting after a lifetime of eating Chinese food, I can tolerate a little warmth for a few hours. That, combined with another guy sleeping a couple rows back without his needed sleep apnea machine, made for an uncomfortable flight. Not! Dinner in Xi'an was at a Muslim/Hallal restaurant where we had a meat broth with vegetables, noodles and torn up pieces of unleavened bread soaked in, hinting of the Muslim influences in Xi'an, as it was the end of the ancient Silk Road that ran from Istanbul to Xi'an.



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Tuesday, July 3 - Xi'an

Frank (a typical Chinese name), our tour guide in Xi'an retrieved us this morning for a trip to visit the famous Terracotta Army. On the way there we stopped at the Terracotta Warrior gift shop, which was cleverly disguised as a museum to show how the warriors were made. After the first room where a few women were making miniature warrior statues, we entered a tourist gift shop that put all other tourist traps we've been in to shame.

This place had huge showrooms for Terracotta Warriors of all sizes, lacquer furniture, all kinds of artwork, rugs, jewelry, jade and much more. We used the clean restrooms and escaped without purchasing/overpaying for anything.

We then visited the actual site of the Terracotta Army, where more than 8,000 soldiers, 130 chariots with 520 horses and 150 cavalry horses made of clay guarded the mausoleum site of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who ruled as the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty from 220 to 210 BC. He created the army to protect him in his afterlife and buried it 15 feet underground. The site was only discovered and restored into a popular tourist site in the 1970's.



we wanted to. Strange animals on sticks, fried and coated with different seasonings. While I'm not a germaphobe and don't go around all day washing and rubbing my hands with hand sanitizer, today I made an exception after visiting the Muslim Quarter. We then visited the home of a local family, made some new friends, learned how to prepare Chinese dumplings and had dinner with them.

Our next stop was for a Chinese writing lesson with a calligraphy expert. We learned the various strokes involved in writing Chinese characters. Next up, a visit to the Muslim Quarter was a sensory overload of all our senses except taste, as we were warned not to eat anything. The warning wasn't necessary, as the street food was so foreign we won't even know HOW to eat it if





Wednesday, July 4 – Xi'an and Chengdu

Not a typical July 4th celebration with BBQ, apple pie and fireworks in Xi'an. It was raining so we decided not to bike ride atop the ancient city walls as planned, though Frank was up for it if we wanted to. Instead we just walked from one watch tower to another with our umbrellas. That was plenty. We visited the Forest of Steles, where they keep all the ancient stone engravings showing codes of conduct, history, etc., from before there was paper. Then to the train station to catch a high-speed 150 mph electric train to Chengdu. Of the thousands of

people in the modern, clean and huge train station, we were the only Westerners there. Upon arriving in Chengdu, the fourth largest city in China with 18 million people, we went with our guide Shannon (another typical Chinese name) for Sichuan hot pot dinner, which is basically a vat of boiling hot chili "soup" in which you cook meats and vegetables. It was spicy but delicious, though my rice was a little watered-down from the liquids flowing from my eyes and nose. So far, our stomachs are holding up.



Thursday, July 5 – Chengdu

We got an early start today to go the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. We saw lots of pandas in their natural habitats, as well as baby pandas being cared for by park staff. Walt Disney would be proud of the way they've created the park and move crowds of people through it. After lunch, where we sat in a smoke-filled room under the No Smoking sign and toasted with Chinese White Liquor with the table next to us, we walked to Wangjianglou Park. There we learned mahjong while drinking tea and having our ear canals cleaned, which in China is one of three enjoyments of life, after bathing and foot kneading. I'm not making this stuff up. Guys wandering around the tables in the park clean ears for about \$5 US. I have a \$50 co-pay every time I go to the ENT to have my ears cleaned, so of course I did it, along with Jerry and Maxine. Lori doesn't have an ear wax problem, so she passed on this enjoyment. Besides that, we





attracted attention from curious bystanders, from 6-year-olds to 80-year-olds who wanted to meet us, practice English and take a photo with us wherever we went. Interestingly, I was also quite a phenomenon in the men's restroom in the park, where several of the Chinese men peeing next to me had no reservations looking over the partitions at me in curiosity, and even commenting, having never seen a Westerner's penis before. We then walked around a shopping area, sampling some of the street food this time.



Chengdu, and all of China, have really amazed us on the progress they've made, compared to our impressions going in. This is not a third world country. Public facilities and infrastructure are modern and world-class. The cities we visited are built up, with huge apartment complexes in the city centers where there are jobs for everyone. There's major construction projects going on everywhere you look. Every modern convenience is available and luxury goods are everywhere. And they have pandas.

Tomorrow we're off to Shanghai, the last stop on our trip.

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Friday, July 6 – Shanghai

Dinner last night was an adventure. It was the first time we had to order without the help of an English-speaking guide. We found a restaurant that had a lot of people in it, so it must be good, right? After showing the hostess four fingers, she led us out the back door, into an elevator and into another restaurant on the second floor. It may or may not be part of the same restaurant, we'll never know. Using Google Translate on our phone to help figure out the menu items, every time we came across an item that sounded acceptable, we ordered it, without keeping track of how many items we ordered. Turns out we ordered so much they made us pay in advance and proceeded to bring enough food for several Chinese families. They were stacking the dishes on our table we ordered so much. It was all good, no one got sick and everyone had enough to eat, though some of the dishes were VERY spicy.

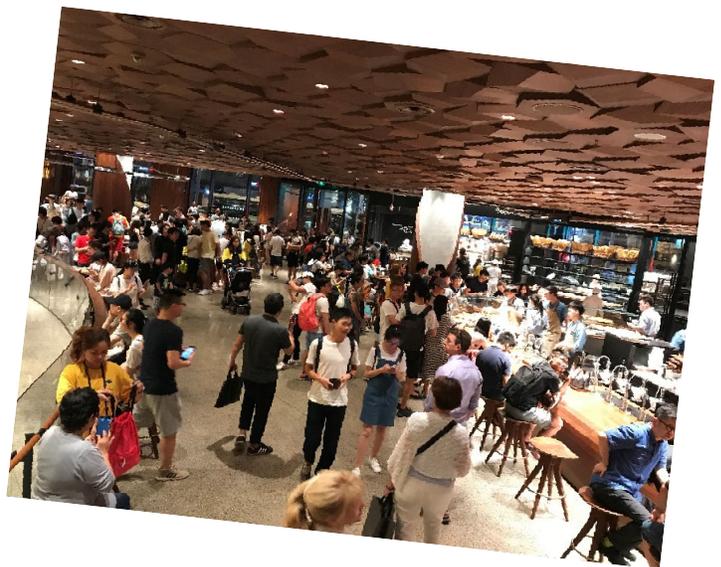


Departed for the airport to fly to Shanghai in the morning. Our guide Jeffery (another typical Chinese name) took us to the Xintiandi District, the former French Concession, where we walked around and had dinner.

Saturday, July 7 – Shanghai

Toured around Shanghai all day today, starting with the Shanghai Museum where we saw all types of ancient Chinese bronze, jade, furniture, porcelain and calligraphy

pieces. Then we walked around the Tianzifang Art District, the Old Town and Bazaar and Yu Garden. After touring all day we went to the world's largest Starbucks, a 27,000 square-foot, two-story building that sells every type of Starbucks merchandise you can imagine, coffee, tea, food, and alcoholic beverages. For dinner we needed a break from Chinese food and ended up at an Italian restaurant.



Sunday, July 8 – Shanghai



We spent the morning at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, housed in the old Ohel Moishe Synagogue. Shanghai received about 23,000 Jews that fled Europe in the 1930's and 40's, since visas weren't required to enter. Most left after World War II, but Shanghai provided the safe haven they needed to escape Germany. After an afternoon of walking around the Nanjing Road shopping area, we did a food tour in the evening. We visited six different restaurants specializing in different regional cuisines of China, including rabbit head at one of the stops. Tastes like chicken, of course.



Monday, July 9 – Flight home

Transferred to the airport this morning via the Shanghai Maglev train, which hits a top speed of 431 km/hour (256 mph). Then settled in for our 14 hour flight to Detroit and a 7 hour layover before the flight to Fort Lauderdale.

We had a great time in China, met some nice people and learned a lot about the country. It was an interesting time to travel in China, with all the current events in the news regarding trade disputes between the US and China. The one theme that we kept sensing during our travels was China's history of intentionally resisting influences, including cultural, political and military, from outside the country. Also, the recent growth in infrastructure is amazing. Construction is going on everywhere. The conflict is how China balances the openness that trade brings to its people in order to continue the economic growth trajectory that it is currently on.