

October 2002

Trivia Question: How many diapers has the average Chinese father changed in his lifetime?

The destination for this year's Magical Mystery Tour was no surprise as Cheryl guessed correctly on her first try. It was 14 hours from Detroit to Tokyo, then 3 and a half more to Beijing. At the airport we were met by our first in a series of eleven different tour guides. The sightseeing over the next two days included Tienanmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Temple of Heaven and a couple of hours hiking on the Great Wall.

Our small group of six signed up with Rim-Pac Tours, a New York company we learned is affiliated with the government controlled tourist agency. The Chinese government likes to pretend that it doesn't own or control everything, but our guides were government employees who took us to government owned stores and restaurants. They were clearly well trained in giving the official Party Line answers to sensitive questions. Freedom of speech is not part of the program in China.

Our meals were included in the tour and it was largely the same for lunch and dinner. Our group of six would get eight or nine different stir-fry dishes to share, rice, some soup and fruit for dessert. There is almost no dairy or sugar in our diets for two weeks. There was sometimes something called "beef" but we didn't see a single cow during our extensive travels in the country. It may have been water buffalo. Come to think of it, we didn't see many dogs running around.

Beijing has been developing rapidly since my last visit in 1997. There were lots of new apartment buildings, highways and airport terminals. Cell phone towers are springing up rapidly, and it seems like there were ATM's on every corner. The city was generally clean except for the air as an army of sweepers cleaned the streets by hand. They take great pride in hosting the 2008 Olympic Games and the preparations are already underway. The people are generally well behaved, but not nearly as polite as the Japanese. Chairman Mao's "little red book" is quite clear in instructing the people to criticize incorrect behavior.

The Chinese people have some hygiene habits which we would consider unusual by Western standards. The country which invented paper rarely uses it in the "bathroom". Toilets are holes in the floor. Babies are carried around the city without diapers, but rather wearing crotchless pants. Ponder the ramifications of that for a while. I suppose it's better than what we saw in Puerto Rico earlier in the year where several mothers flung used diapers out of car windows onto the side of the road.

Trivia Question: How did China get its name?

It was a one and a half hour flight from Beijing to Xi'an. Outside this large city are 8000 life-size terra-cotta warriors and horses in battle formation who have stood silent sentinel

for over 2000 years to the ego of Emperor Qin. They were uncovered by a farmer digging a well in 1974. The original farmer was in the souvenir shop signing \$15 picture books. “Qin” is pronounced “cheen” and is the root of what we today call China. Our guide explained that Emperor Qin “unified” China, but “conquered” is probably a more apt description. 700,000 slaves are said to have spent 38 years to build this tomb with all of its fascinating cultural relics. There was a first-rate history museum and an unbroken eight-mile long wall surrounding the inner city.

The thick air of Xi’an is the worst we’ve ever tasted in our lives. The combination of vehicle exhaust, coal heaters, industrial pollution and burning of corn stalks in the countryside left the impression that the city is suffering from a mild case of nuclear winter. Visibility was never more than a mile. The sun floated in the sky like an orange ball unable to penetrate the gray smog. The cultural relics and history were great, but we were happy to leave Xi’an on our hour-long commuter flight to Wuhan and the start of our Yangtze River cruise.

Trivia Question: What 1972 Burt Reynolds film was about a river adventure just before a dam flooded a valley?

It was a six-hour bus ride from the airport in Wuhan to the start of our Yangtze River cruise near Yichang. Our 20-year-old tired cruise ship was named “Isabella 6”. She’s 265 feet long and carries 114 passengers and an attentive crew of 90. The reason we timed this trip for now is that the Three Gorges Dam closes the river on November 1st and will soon be the world’s largest. In June, the new lake will be 230 feet deep, and in 2009 it will be flooded 135 feet deeper still. It will be longer than Lake Superior. Cruises will run next summer, but the scenery in the famous Three Gorges will never be as spectacular, so everyone is understandably nervous about the future of tourism in the area.

You may recall scenes from Burt Reynolds “interesting” encounters with the locals in “Deliverance”, the film which brought us “Dueling Banjos”, a scene of graves being dug up for relocation and other impressionable scenes.

Dump trucks were just beginning to push rocks into the shipping channel, as we were one of the final ships to sail past the partially completed dam. The next three days were unforgettable. The scenery in the steep gorges was fantastic although the brown river was polluted by most everything imaginable (except toilet paper or diapers). The part that we’ll never forget is the relocation of over a million people as a result of the dam. The lower cities were being torn down one brick at a time with sledgehammers and new apartment buildings were springing up on the hillsides above the future water line. Walking through the cities during the destruction felt like World War II after the air raids. It was eerie.

The government tour guides explained that most people were happy to get the new houses with running water, a luxury not common in the older cities. Come to think of it,

the plumbing on the cruise ship seemed as though it was maintained by someone without running water in their home.

Our ship docked in Chongqing on the fourth morning. In Chongqing, not many tourists stop for long and our group was the cause of quite a bit of staring in a back street market. We were surrounded by Chinese fascinated with our appearance, blond hair, even our differently styled shoes. We're not used to that kind of attention.

Trivia Question: If Chinese government policy allows only one child per family, how does the population continue to grow?

In the evening we flew to Guilin. Guilin is famous for its knobby limestone hills which are a popular theme in Asian art. It was easily the most beautiful place we visited on this trip. We took a four-hour boat ride on the Li River. The scenery was breathtaking, but Guilin receives 9,000,000 tourists each year including 8,000,000 Chinese tourists. There were 200 boats choking the narrow river. It was like a freeway at rush hour, and the boat operators were less than polite. Back in the city, money is being poured into a beautiful waterfront, new housing, and nice hotels.

Most of the young children we saw seemed quite spoiled. This is understandable given the one child per family policy even with its numerous loopholes for the wealthy and the ethnic minorities. The policy is also widely ignored amongst the rural farmers who see children as a great asset for the hours of stooped-over labor. But in the cities, there is generally one child per two parents who also receive the attention of four grandparents. Imagine a world with no brothers or sisters, uncles or aunts, or even cousins. If you, your parents and grandparents were not all first-born, then you wouldn't even exist.

Trivia Question: What do traffic signals mean in Shanghai?

I was fascinated by the rapid growth, tearing down and rebuilding of Shanghai since my last visit in 1997. The air seems to have improved somewhat thanks to a ban on coal burning to heat apartments, unleaded gas and cars with better emissions systems. We toured the Bund which is an area of European style buildings along the waterfront, did some shopping and visited the old city of Suzhou which Marco Polo referred to as the "Venice of the East".

The people of Shanghai have not yet come to grips with modern traffic control. Traffic signals are ignored by cars, bicycle and fearless pedestrians. Crossing the street is an adventure, even with a green "walk" signal. Shopping for clothes and souvenirs stuffed our suitcases for the trip home. Cheryl became increasingly self-conscious while trying on clothes. She was wearing an XL or XXL by Chinese standards. All the sales clerks were able to say with their limited English was "bigger.... bigger". Our friend Leo took me to a nightclub with a Philippino band to celebrate our last night.

We had a great trip in spite of the pollution. The culture is absorbing and country is developing rapidly, but still has a long way to go.

Back to www.odendahls.com