

China – Ancient & Modern

Shanghai:

We arrived safely at Shanghai Airport at 6.30am after the 12 hour overnight flight from Auckland. We were met by Cindy, our delightful tour guide (the first of many) and driver. After an hour and a half we arrived in the city and our hotel. We elected to check in, have a rest and be refreshed and ready for our introduction to the city at noon. Our city tour showed us the new city, especially the riverfront area, and The Bund, which is a long esplanade planted with flower beds and fronting many of the old colonial buildings which speak of Shanghai's colourful and multicultural past. Many of these buildings were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the British, French and other European merchants and settlers. The HSBC building is really impressive and looks more like an ornate Catholic Cathedral than a bank, with incredible gilded mosaics depicting 'God shining on the righteous' i.e. the white traders and bankers! There were also mosaics showing the signs of the zodiac and others showing scenes from the other countries the bank operated in ... no sign or mention of the Chinese at all! Sadly, photography was not allowed.



Colonial-era buildings along The Bund



21st Century buildings at Pudong

Across the river is the ultra-modern part of the city, called Pudong, which wasn't even built when Martin visited the city in the late '80s, when it was all muddy subsistence farms, and The Bund was knee-deep in litter and filth. Some of the modern architecture is fascinating and imaginative and some is definitely not; no surprise to learn that the 'not' was the responsibility of the (Soviet) Russians. They were the only friends China had after the 'Great Leap Forward' and 'Cultural Revolution' and they got away with just about anything they wanted.

We were then taken on a walk to look at a traffic roundabout. We were a bit puzzled until we got there and saw that it is actually a beautiful garden with an elevated walkway round it. It was a popular strolling place for families and young couples and had it not been for the cars grand-prixing around it, with attendant fumes, it would have been a tranquil spot for taking the air!



Floral roundabout



and traffic island

Something which struck us very forcibly while walking in Shanghai was the number of times we had our photographs taken, sometimes surreptitiously and sometimes quite openly. When one chap ran up to us, grabbed Martin's arm and posed while his companion took a photo, we asked the guide what was going on. She explained that the photographers were almost certainly from remote parts of China where they never see a foreigner. Apparently they come to cities like Shanghai purely to see westerners, so in effect, we were the tourist attraction. It happened in other places, too, but was far more noticeable here. Once we understood, we were happy to pose with anyone who asked,

and their children – but felt rather sorry for them that a pair of geriatric winkies was the most exciting thing they had ever encountered. Martin's height and white beard made him a particular target for the shutter-bugs!

The next day was not only very cold but also very wet. Fortunately we started by visiting the excellent museum where we saw the most beautiful calligraphy, paintings, ceramics and, best of all, ancient jade artefacts and ornaments. Some were quite exquisitely and finely worked, and dated from 5000 years BC! The exhibits were very well displayed and labelled in English and Chinese. There were also informative, illustrated explanatory leaflets available in each section, all free of charge.

The rain had stopped by the time we had finished at the museum and went to a silk factory. The process was very interesting and Sarah was surprised at the different aspects of manufacture and the various qualities of silk and how it is graded. Of course, the hard sell followed but we were a sad disappointment to them as our wallets remained firmly closed.

Lunch was next followed by a walk down Nanjing Road, the main shopping street, which was interesting for the old umbrella mender squatting at the side of the road and also the barber cutting hair on a chair set up on the pavement ... same sheet round the shoulders, comb and scissors for every customer!



Barber at work



Mending umbrellas

There were some interesting shops selling everything from recognisable western lollies (including Hershey's Kisses, Reese's Peanut Buttercups and Snickers bars) to dried fruits, vegetables and unmentionable animal parts, as well as bottles of stuff we really didn't want to know about. The most interesting thing was the prices in the shop, which started at 1 or 2 Yuan but went up to several thousand Yuan - all mixed up together and not under lock and key or armed guard as we would have expected. The exchange rate was approximately US\$1 = 7 Yuan, NZ\$1 = 5 Yuan and £1 = 10Yuan.

The ancient city was next and this was exactly as one would expect ancient China to look, with curved-roofed, tiled buildings, cobbled courtyards and all. Most of the buildings were reconstructions but there were enough old ones left to show us that they were good reproductions so we did get a feel for what it must have been like. Also here are the Yu Gardens which are genuinely ancient, and very beautiful, with lots of rockeries, streams, lakes, bridges, pavilions and many varieties of trees and plants. The plum blossom was just coming out and smelled lovely. There is a very famous Tea Rooms in the middle of the lake but we spent so long in the gardens we decided we could live without experiencing a half-hour tea ceremony followed by an expensive cup of slightly yellow hot water and so we dodged into Starbucks (Oh, the shame!) for ten minutes instead - and thawed out with a ruinously expensive coffee.



Ancient city buildings



Ancient tea rooms



Pavilions & Ponds



Rockeries and plum blossom



Ancient tourists

Dinner was followed by an acrobatic show which was simply stupendous. The girls were so supple we were sure they'd had their bones removed and the men, who looked very puny and had the sort of hairstyles the likely lads in western pop groups favour, were actually very strong and able to hold, balance and throw each other around the stage without any obvious effort. There were some very young acrobats - around five or six years old – who did really well and were quite funny, tumbling, playing tricks on the adults and pretending to sabotage their acts.

Now for a slight chronological 'cheat': We returned to Shanghai two weeks later, on our 'Princess' cruise, but will report on that visit here, for continuity's sake.

We started by catching the shuttle bus from the port into town and then got the Metro to the Maglev station. This is the magnetic levitation train which was featured on some of the scientific programmes on Discovery and National Geographic TV (Richard Hammond or James May almost certainly!). It runs from downtown Shanghai to the international airport and is the only commercially functioning one in the world - and likely to remain so given the enormous cost to make and run it. We decided to take a ride and got very excited when the display showed us we had got up to 301kph. It was only Y60 each and worth all of that for the thrill and experience. We did the journey, which had taken an hour and a half by car, in 7 minutes!



Maglev + Trainspotter



Proof of speed!

After returning to the city, by cheap Metro (Y18 for an all day ticket) which took nearly an hour, we went to one of the massive shopping complexes which sold every imaginable faked designer brand handbag, watch and electronics, plus myriad computer programs and games. What an awful experience! We were accosted even before we got out of the Metro station and were subjected to a barrage of shopkeepers trying to drag us into their stores - it was all really off-putting. The watches are not on open sale but blokes in dirty t-shirts sidle up to you with tatty photos saying "Want to by real fake Lolex?" They then take you to a shop where there is ordinary merchandise on sale, open a 'cupboard' and take you through to a room where you will buy a watch. We had been warned about this and decided that we didn't fancy that scenario, so came away empty-handed but with clear consciences. Apart from that, we're also told that the 'knockoff' merchandise is no longer the bargain it used to be. No doubt the presence of 3,000 cruise passengers in town did a bit to raise prices, too.

We then went back to Nanjing Road where there were such crowds (it was a public holiday) that we dodged into a big, modern Mall and treated ourselves to (another) Starbucks coffee and croissant, plus choccy cake, for late lunch; we

felt we'd earned it! Actually it had become a point of honour to have another coffee in a Starbucks in Shanghai because when we were there before, we went to one and filled out a survey, which gave us a free coffee next time we went, but only in Shanghai. Given the cost of coffee in China (Y50 or thereabouts), there was no way we were going to pass that up!

Now back to the original schedule:

Yichang:

The next morning we were picked up and taken to the airport for our flight to the biggest small town you never heard of, Yichang, where we were to catch our river boat. All went smoothly and the hour and 40 minute flight was as comfortable as could be hoped for. Martin indulged in the lunch, beef with rice and pickled vegetables (that's what they said it was, anyway - he said it didn't taste of anything in particular) but Sarah wasn't hungry enough. We were on the ground before we knew we were even close as it was very foggy and soggy, but at least we got there - we later met some people who had been rained and fogged out and been brought to the boat by a very circuitous route, including a 5-hour bus drive. This was not the only time we had cause to be grateful that we were travelling as a party of two and were thus spared many of the inconveniences and 'herding' suffered by those in larger groups.

We were met by another very good guide, Helen, and driver and taken for a tour of the city - about as exciting as any suburban dormitory town but much, much bigger (4 million inhabitants) and less beautiful. To be fair, the fog and rain didn't help and we felt really sorry for the guide who told us that they usually took people for a walk along the riverside park. We took pity on her and said we'd be happy to do that too - but maybe for 20 minutes not a full hour! Actually it was moderately interesting in its way and the rain did stop and the fog lifted slightly so we could see the barges and other river craft - and the new railway bridge, which was clearly a huge source of pride and joy! We think the guide was quite glad when we asked if it was possible to go to a shop selling Nokia as the battery on our phone had given up the ghost. We went to a Nokia shop but they didn't have a genuine battery and wanted quite a lot for a generic make. The guide wouldn't let us buy from them and took us to a smaller shop where we got the same battery for a good deal less. It turned out the shop we went to belonged to the driver's best mate! The battery is working fine, so all is well.

On that subject, was it coincidence or very scary x-ray scanners at airports in China which made not only Sarah's phone battery but also Martin's watch battery and our computer mouse fail? We spoke to other people we met on our trip, and on the cruise later, many of whom reported the mysterious failure of sundry batteries and electronic equipment while in China. No doubt it will remain a mystery.

The shopping filled some time so it wasn't too early to go to the restaurant for dinner before joining the ship. Fortunately Martin thought to ask if it was possible to have something a bit spicy (we had really had enough of the bland, oily stuff). The guide was delighted and ordered us a really lovely meal including a delicious chicken, chilli and nut dish called Gom (or Hom) Bao Chicken. She told us they usually give Westerners plain food - wish we'd thought to mention it earlier in the trip, but now we knew!

Yangtze River:

The locks on the Three Gorges Dam were closed for maintenance so we didn't get to go through them, which was disappointing. It also meant the ship was moored upstream from Yichang, above the dam, so we had an hour and a half drive in the dark and rain to get to it. We then had to negotiate some very interesting cable cars down the river bank to the quayside where we had to clamber through several other vessels to reach ours. We were, again, delighted that we had booked privately as we had a porter to carry our bags (one at each end of a bamboo pole) while everyone in a regular tour party had to manage their own.



'Victoria Jenna' moored behind other boats



A cable car – we actually rode in that!

The welcome was warm and the cabin comfortable and modern. Very few of the staff spoke English, which was a challenge, especially as the American cruise director never seems to be about when required! To be fair, the passengers were mainly Chinese (200 and only 28 Westerners) so we were very much in the minority.

Next morning, we toured the Three Gorges Dam and its visitor centre. It is very impressive, especially when one considers it was built using the minimum of technology and maximum man power - they spent a long time justifying the necessity to build it but we remain unconvinced.

Also visiting the Dam were hundreds, possibly even a thousand, school children. It was International Water Conservation Day (who knew?) and they were there to learn about water conservation. They stood, clad in overlarge plastic macs, without their heads covered, however, in the pouring rain (how ironic!), in serried ranks and absolute silence while a lecturer harangued them at inordinate length. Then, all of a sudden, they started singing and chanting in perfect unison and waving bits of blue ribbon around. All very bewildering until one of our number asked a nearby teacher what was happening and she explained it all – and told us the blue ribbon represented water... of course it did! It was all being filmed and we wondered if they, and possibly we tourists, might be on that night's television news.



Serried ranks of schoolchildren



Blue ribbons symbolise water



Still more children overflow the arena

Once that part of their visit was over they were given pamphlets to distribute and it was obviously a point of great pride to give as many as possible to the foreigners who had shown such an interest in them. We ended up with several as we simply couldn't bear the look of disappointment on the slower ones' faces when they saw we had already been got at. They were, of course, all in Chinese, but our grandsons found them interesting and the drawings needed no translation.



The Dam – not a thing of beauty



The safety notice that covered all temptations!

After the visit to the Dam, we started sailing up the river through beautiful scenery; mist-shrouded and very cold, but quite awe-inspiring nonetheless and reminiscent of the beautiful paintings we saw in the museum in Shanghai. We also saw many of the 'Relocation Villages', to which the people were forced to move when their villages were submerged. These are joyless, utilitarian blocks with populations in the hundreds of thousands to millions (some 'village'!) and it is no surprise that the older residents were not happy with them. Apparently the young people are more content because there is more work available for them but the older generation are totally bewildered and cannot come to terms with being removed from their ancestors, poor souls. Ancestor-worship is very important to them and they believe they should never abandon their traditional villages where the ghosts of their ancestors still walk. Many were given the choice of leaving their ancestors undisturbed but no longer accessible, or having them exhumed and their graves moved to their new villages where they could still be visited and cleaned at the appropriate time. This was really no solution, however, as it is as bad to disturb their final resting place as it is to neglect to visit and tend it.



Our route along the Yangtze



Our beautiful river boat

We had four nights on the river boat as we elected to travel upstream, which takes a day longer than the other way and meant that we could see more on the way as progress was more leisurely. The gorges were all as beautiful as each other and quite breathtaking in parts. Before the dam was built, the water was only between 30cm and 1m deep, so not navigable, but now it is between 150m and 175m deep and one can only imagine how the diffs and mountains would have dwarfed everything in the valley in those days – they certainly seemed high enough now!

Along the way we passed villages old and new, farms, factories and beautiful temples, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. At Wushan we left our boat and embarked on smaller 'ferries', actually rather ornate pleasure boats, so that we could navigate the narrow arm of the 'small gorges' up the narrow Shendong Stream, to see monkeys and mountain goats, the 'Hanging Coffin', a covered bridge dinging to a sheer diff side, a precarious hut on another hillside, where we were serenaded by a musician playing traditional instruments – all quite surreal! The Hanging Coffin was actually placed in the mouth of a shallow cave, about 100 metres up a sheer diff and no-one has yet quite worked out how the coffin, presumably with its incumbent, was manhandled up, or possibly down, the diff and put in place. This was done hundreds of years ago so there would have been no machinery to aid the process.

We then transferred to still smaller boats and were taken up an even narrower inlet to see still grander mountains and where we encountered a boat in which a man stood and sang snippets of folk songs. The cynics amongst us assumed that it was a fleece-the-tourists play but there was no question of approaching him or any expectation of payment; presumably he did it for pure enjoyment. We returned to Wushan and rejoined 'Victoria Jenna' before setting sail once again. We passed the vertiginous 'Goddess Mountain' with its craggy summit and, one would swear, the figure of a Goddess standing on top, silhouetted against the sky. The lovely White Emperor City with its stone bridge and pagoda, stood guard over the Qui Gate, a fine engraving of which is to be found on the Y10 note.



Ornate 'ferries'



Hanging Coffin



How ever did they build this path and bridge?



Qui Gate & White EmperorCity

Possibly our absolutely favourite place is Shibaozhai (I can spell it but can't say it!) where there is the most exquisite red pagoda, built into the rocks on its own little island. It is almost impossible to do justice to it in writing so you will have to look at the photograph to appreciate its beauty. It was here, also, that we saw the villagers doing their laundry in the river, near the pagoda. This was the place, above all others, which we felt epitomised the real, heartland of China, rather than the brash modern cities or even the standard 'sights'.



Exquisite red pagoda



The local laundry

The last afternoon of the cruise was at Fengdu, the Ghost City, but as it was on top of a mountain and only to be reached on foot, by means of steep steps and paths, Sarah cried off. Martin went and said that it was a lot of effort for something "quite interesting" so she felt she had made the right decision. There was a fairly good view from river level so she didn't miss out altogether. The modern city of Fengdu is barely visible about 80 metres away on the opposite bank of the river, shrouded in pollution. The guide told dad that they were lucky to be there on a clear, sunny day as it is not often that it can be seen at all!



A 'ghost' at Fengdu



Along climb up

Chinese jollity and get dressed up in Imperial Robes for a 'photo-opportunity' (the things we do for our grandsons!). Every evening on the boat, we had been treated to the most extraordinarily professional displays of dancing, musicianship and traditional folklore, all played by members of the crew. We felt sure that they must have been trained performers first and waiters, chambermaids etc. second – although their The Captain's Farewell Banquet rounded off the day and our final act as passengers was to join the exemplary execution of their more mundane duties indicated that they were highly trained in these, too.

Chongqing:

We had a very strange day after we left the boat and before going to the airport. Chongqing is a city of some 32million inhabitants, recently made famous throughout the world by the murder of an old Harrovian, British 'fixer' and the deposing of the province's most colourful politician. Apart from the Great Hall of the People (which these people weren't allowed to enter) and the Peoples Park, which we were, there is nothing to do nor anything of beauty to see. It was a smoggy day (when isn't it?) but we were told we were lucky to have such good visibility ... hmmm, have you spotted a theme here? There is an interesting Immigrant Museum (the 'immigrants' came from other parts of China) and where we had a good guide who explained everything very well. Of course we ended up in the gift shop but there was nothing we wanted to buy so we were told it would be acceptable to just 'feed the Buddha' - i.e. make a donation!



Roof of the Immigration Museum



People outside the Peoples' Palace

The museum took up about an hour but the poor guide still had to fill in time so took us to see the magnificent new bridge. This was built in three distinct styles as it had been started by the Russians then they fell out so the Chinese carried on with the construction but ran out of money so the 'people of Macao' finished it off to celebrate their return to the old of the Chinese Motherland (a year after Hong Kong). It was the most appalling example of a building project you've never seen and we're staggered it's still standing! We're glad we hadn't known its history before we were driven over it! After a lunch of Hom (or Gom) Bao chicken (again - word had obviously spread through the Tour Guide grapevine as we were to have this dish in some form or virtually every 'included' meal during the rest of our trip!) we were taken to the airport where we caught the plane to Xi'an.

Xi'an:

We got to Xi'an about 3pm and were greeted by yet another delightful; guide and driver – Cathy was our favourite and we became quite fond of her during our short stay in Xi'an. She was very excited when she saw Martin as she was proud to have responsibility for "the tallest and most bearded" tourist to alight from our plane! We were taken to see the ancient city walls which extend 13km right round the ancient city and it is, apparently, possible to walk and ride bikes along them – we didn't but lots of people did and one had to keep ones wits about one to avoid being bowled by an over-enthusiastic but rather less than observant cyclist! Words cannot do them justice but the photos might give you an idea. There are ornate buildings and pagodas and the whole of the ancient city is quite stunning. We hadn't realised that Xi'an is one of the oldest (ex) capital cities in the world and had been home to most of the major dynasties and their emperors. In the evening we went to an Imperial Dumpling Banquet followed by an excellent display of traditional song and dance.



Ornate buildings



Cycling atop the walls



The Ancient City Bell

The next day was dedicated to the Terracotta Warriors. Awesome is a much over-used word these days but it is the only one to describe the sight of all those thousands of figures arising from the ground – all different in feature and dress, but all the same height and in perfect serried ranks. (Their orderliness evoked a fleeting memory of all those school children at the Three Gorges Dam!) We were also able to see some of the areas still being excavated and it was extraordinary to see a boot here and a head there, still half buried – quite breathtaking. The site is enormous and we spent almost a day there and still didn't do it all justice, though there is a saturation point and after that it's hard to take in any more information. If we had seen and done nothing else on this trip, Xi'an would have made it all worthwhile.



Ranks of Warriors



Every one is different



Even from behind the detail is perfect

Beijing:

Another internal flight took us smoothly to Beijing. Our first visit in that extraordinary city was to the circular Temple of Heaven, which is quite exquisite and, we discovered, every bit as beautiful as the Forbidden City. What we also particularly liked were the gardens and colonnades, which are used as public recreation areas and where we saw children playing games, old men playing a type of Chinese chess, others playing two-stringed bowed instruments (surprisingly tuneful!), people practicing Tai Chi and sundry other exercise routines, so rhythmically that it was almost like watching a dance. There were also couples posing for their wedding photographs, something we were to see again outside the walls of the Forbidden City.



Concentrating on the game



Temple of Heaven



Outbuildings of the Temple of Heaven

Something else we noticed was that all children under the age three of wear trousers which don't have a crotch seam and neither do they wear undies or nappies. Sarah was about to take a photo (from behind) of one chirpy little chappy when he squatted to do what nature intended and she rather lost the desire for a picture (or lunch!).

We also visited a hutong (these are old walled villages with traditional courtyard houses), most of which were bulldozed before the Olympics. We were taken round in a trishaw, which was a novel experience, to say the least. We met one of the residents in his home and were surprised to encounter a long-haired, western-dressed gentleman of obvious means, not the poor peasant we expected! It appears that only the very wealthy can afford houses in the hutongs nowadays. Even though, in truth, they are hardly better than hovels, they are now some of the most expensive real estate in China. Actually, we shouldn't have been surprised because all the cars parked around the hutongs were Lexus, Mercedes, BMW, Audi and the like!



How comy!



Typical hutong transport



Hutong hardware store



House exterior



House interior



House interior, showing courtyard

We visited Tiananmen Square, with its huge portrait of Chairman Mao at the main gate. Seeing it, we remembered the terrible events which took place there. Today the square was just as crowded as the TV pictures of that time showed but this time with tourists - literally thousands and 99% of them Chinese. Having heard Mao and the Cultural Revolution soundly panned and nothing but criticism from all our other guides, we were very surprised when our Beijing guide told us that her parents almost revered Mao for improving their lives beyond all their dreams. It seems that they were impoverished farmers eking out a living, going hungry when the crops failed and being treated like animals, used as beasts of burden and whipping boys by the landowners in their village. We then realised that the other guides had come from professional families, who had been brought to their knees by the revolution. It was interesting to hear this side of the story and get a further insight into the real situation of those times. A measure of Mao's influence can be gauged by the size of the queue waiting to visit his tomb.



The queue for Mao's tomb



A few tourists in Tiananmen Square



Mao's portrait at the main gate

The Forbidden City was next and everything you have ever seen or read about it cannot do it justice. The magnificence of the architecture and decorations are quite stupendous and we hope that these photos will give you an idea of the crowds and, in spite of them, the splendour of it all... though you will have seen pictures in books and television films about it, so we probably aren't adding much to what you already know. There are so many parts to walk through to get to the Central Hall that it was a bit like climbing a mountain: just as you think you're there, another,

grander building comes into view. Again, the hundreds of tour groups made it a busy and noisy experience, and it was hard to imagine the serenity which must have been the case when it only housed the Emperor and his household!



The queue to enter



Approaching the Central Hall



Architectural & Decorative details

Great Wall:

We spent the next day at the Great Wall, and climbed a little bit of it, along with thousands of other, again mainly Chinese, tourists. The steps were huge and hand rails precarious or non-existent so Sarah decided discretion was the better part of valour and that honour had been satisfied after half a dozen or so steps; Martin made the same decision about 100 steps later, having realised that coming down would be even trickier than the ascent. Still, we can say we've done it and, as with the Terracotta Warriors, it made the whole China experience so memorable.



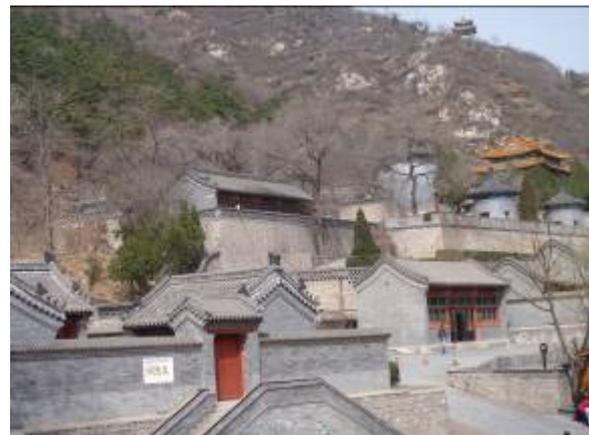
It's very steep



Coming down was harder



Access to the Wall



Administrative offices at the base of the Wall

There was surprisingly little commerce at the gates to the Wall but there was a calligrapher and we commissioned him to make a scroll with our family's names in characters. It was fascinating to watch him work out the syllables and then translate them into characters – though whether they bear any resemblance to the originals but it doesn't matter because it's a lovely work of art in itself:



Calligrapher at work



The finished scroll

For lunch we were taken to a simply enormous tourist restaurant where the food was OK-ish but the government sponsored cloisonné workshop downstairs was really interesting - just for once we didn't mind being taken to a shop. But we did refuse to detour to a jade factory (also government sponsored) on the way back to the hotel ... and had to give the guide a signed waiver to say we had refused to go, otherwise she would have got into trouble. I suspect that had we not shopped for cloisonné we would have been frog-marched to the jade place, like it or not. The Chinese have taken to capitalism with gusto!



Cloisonné artist at work on his design Detail of the pattern which will be filled with coloured enamel like this

The Olympic Village was obviously a source of pride but we found it rather disappointing and soulless. The Water Cube wasn't a cube but rather a single-story block, which looked as though it was clad in blue bubble-wrap (albeit with very large bubbles) and neither it, nor the rather scrappy 'Birds Nest', both of which had looked so spectacular on television, actually lived up to their promise. We were told that they were in regular use by the general public and various sports and swimming clubs but someone we spoke to later, who had gone to see them and have a swim in the 'cube' said they were firmly closed and there was no evidence that they were in use at all. Who knows? There were some extraordinary modern buildings, mainly apartment blocks, and we were told that these had housed the athletes during the games. They were offered for sale to private buyers in advance of the games, with the proviso that the purchasers could not take possession until afterwards and the price would depend on the eminence and success of the athlete who had occupied it – and even with these caveats every single one was sold before the games started!

On our last night in Beijing we were taken to the original Peking duck restaurant, Quán jù dé, which started in 1864 as a hawker stall but now has dining rooms on two storeys and is really quite opulent. The duck was delicious and a bonus was being able to see into the kitchen and watch it all being prepared. I suspect that in very few of China's restaurants would that be a welcome or appetising sight!

We left Beijing, travelling with the guide, Margaret, and driver who had looked after us so well in that city, and made our way to the port of Tianjin, about two hours drive away. The scenery was pretty featureless but we saw a lot of old farms and temples in daily use, showing the same architectural and decorative features, but with none of the colour and gilding of the more famous ones, and so arguably more typical than those. The farming methods are still archaic and manual labour the norm. There was no machinery to be seen anywhere but very ancient, bent and wizened men and women doing the backbreaking work of cultivation. Out of the modern cities with their fantastic, futuristic, sparkling glass towers of offices and conspicuous displays of obscene wealth, the country seems to recede several hundred years into the past... so much for the cultural revolution!

When we arrived in Tianjin we were in for a huge shock: Since the third day of our Yangtze cruise the weather had steadily improved and by the time we got to Beijing it was hot and sunny – definitely t-shirt weather and the sunshine stayed with us all the way to Tianjin. As we left the car at the cruise terminal however, we were almost knocked over by the icy wind, blowing at gale force. We rapidly donned our (woefully inadequate) jackets which we were only carrying because of lack of room in our cases. We were bent double into the searingly dry wind as we made the short

walk into the terminal, but even this was enough to scour any exposed skin and Sarah's hands became chapped and sore within the 10 minutes we were exposed. We learnt afterwards that the temperature was 4°C (it was 25°C in Beijing the day before) but that the windchill had put it well below freezing.

Now for another chronological digression: We called at Hong Kong on our Princess cruise but will write about it here as it is part of China so, geographically, should be included with the rest of that country.

Hong Kong:

Having lived there for two years from '89 to '91 we thought we knew Hong Kong but how wrong we were! Luckily, we had arranged to spend the day with our erstwhile next-door neighbours, Dee and Geoff Lovegrove who proved to be not only wonderful companions (as always) but also excellent tour guides. Not only had the container terminal where we docked not existed when we lived there, neither did the land on which it was built! A shuttle bus ride to Kowloon's Ocean Terminal revealed an array of multi-lane roads, buildings and ongoing development on the reclaimed land. We met at the new YMCA and found that although HK had changed beyond recognition, our friends had not and the 21 years since we had last seen them just melted away.

Geoff had planned a great day for us which included using as many forms of transport as could be fitted in, travelling over as much 'new' land and as many new roads, bridges and railways as possible.

We used to live in Discovery Bay on Lantau Island which was then a small enclave of pleasant flats and maisonettes, with just a few shops, a bank, restaurant and social club. The only way to get there was by ferry from Central, which took around 30 minutes, and then walk the few minutes to our flat – and that was it ... no other means of transport to and from HK Island. The only mode of transport in DB was a limited number of golf buggies. Now it is a huge development accessible by road with bus connections to the subway. The airport and Disneyland are nearby although not really noticeable in DB itself. We went there by a combination of buses and saw our old flat which seemed unchanged in among the surrounding high-rise blocks, before returning to Hong Kong island by fast jet ferry.

It was Easter Saturday when we were there and the beach and esplanade were crowded with families waiting for their chance to dig up an Easter Egg – lots of jollity and loudspeakers but sadly for us, it was not at all the quiet and peaceful retreat from the bustle of the city we remember.

All that filled the morning and we were ready for lunch by the time the ferry got us back to Central. Geoff, who is a dab hand at finding taxis, secured one even before the rest of us had left the disembarkation ramp and we were whisked to the elegance of the Hong Kong Club. Here we had an excellent curry lunch, waited on by one particular 'ancient retainer' whom one could imagine had been there since the old colonial times, aeons before HK was returned to China in 1997...

After lunch we walked through to the Star Ferry and headed back to Kowloon side. It was only then that we realized that we hadn't seen any of the famous trams. There has been so much reclamation that the street on which they travel is now well back from the waterfront, rather than just one road away.

We walked through the Ocean Terminal shopping centre, which seemed to consist entirely of (genuine) designer stores, all apparently doing a roaring trade. Afternoon tea at a Mövenpick restaurant was a treat and, although conversation had flowed all day, it provided a final opportunity to catch up on any last minute news before we had to catch the shuttle bus back to the port and our ship.



Dawn light



Night light

Our departure from Hong Kong provided a magnificent Grand Finale to our China experience: As a special concession, the port authorities let us sail away through Victoria Harbour, between Central and Kowloon, and we were astonished to see that the ship nearly filled the channel, so much reclamation has been done. Every night there is a 'Symphony of Light' show which comprises a few lasers shooting across from each side and all the big buildings being lit up with multi-colours, amazing moving patterns and generally thoroughly OTT consumption of power! Apparently the government started the idea at the height of the SARS epidemic to cheer people up and it was so popular they've kept it going.

Random observations in no particular order:

- All the guides were surprised at how much we had read about China, it's geography, economic and political systems.
- They were also surprised to learn that NZ and China are strong trade partners in both directions.
- China smells of lavatories (even clean ones!), incense, vegetation, garlic, rancid fat, drains fermented bean curd and diesel/petrol fumes... even in the beautiful countryside.
- All the guides were young women (early 30s) who introduced themselves by English first names (Cindy, Helen, Cathy, Margaret) whereas the drivers were all addressed as Mr Wong, Mr Liu, Mr Chin, Mr Li. We wondered why? It seemed demeaning to the women but maybe not as bad as having their Chinese names mis-pronounced?
- There is a well-developed social welfare system. Elderly people receive a pension of around Y3000 per month; the average wage in Beijing is around Y4000 per month (less in the country, more in Shanghai) and it costs about Y4000 per square metre to buy a house or apartment – with mortgages readily available.
- We saw a huge number of (apparently) very wealthy people, well dressed in designer gear, driving top-of-the-range luxury vehicles.
- There is little sympathy for those who are less well off – We were told of a man who had a minor accident with a Rolls Royce in his cheap little runabout, which came off worst. The owner of the Rolls, which was merely scratched, insisted on reporting the accident and extracting payment for the repair as the other man should have taken more care not to damage the property of others.
- Driving is either the best or worst in the world depending on your point of view. There are very few accidents as everyone expects other drivers to be speeding, swapping lanes etc. Traffic lights, zebra crossings and road signs are merely suggestions, it seems, rather than safety measure to be observed. A road may be two, three or four lanes, possibly even five, depending on how many cars are able to squeeze alongside each other – regardless of lane markings.
- There is marvelous public transport in China, including 'bullet' trains and we wondered why the tour companies didn't use these more; traffic congestion is so bad that it takes an hour to do 10 kilometres. Even if they only used them for transporting tourists to and from airports it would help, although we would have enjoyed travelling between cities by train rather than air, in order to see more of the countryside. We asked about this but were not really given an answer.
- Chinese tour groups are very regimented and their guides terrified of losing them. They are all given brightly coloured hats to wear so they can be spotted if they wander off. One ancient lady at Tiananmen square caught our eye; she was dressed in beautiful pink brocade 'Sunday Best' but this was topped with a fluorescent orange baseball cap – most incongruous. We also wondered what Burberry would have thought of the group sporting knock-off 'Burberry' patterned bucket hats.
- Most of the Chinese tourists were very elderly and would have remembered the 'bad old days'. We wondered how they felt about all the changes – and the events in Tiananmen square – and how it felt to be free to travel after all the years of restrictions.
- We were constantly jostled and pushed out of the way in queues (what queues?) and we felt that the Chinese were quite rude (not our guides, who were all delightful and obviously well-schooled in the ways of Westerners) but then we realised that in a country with such a vast population, if you don't look out for 'Number One', you would never get anywhere, nor anything so perhaps it was understandable after all.

This much awaited and longed for journey was Sarah's dream (Martin having been less than impressed when he visited in the late '80s) and it surpassed all our hopes and expectations. It was arduous, tiring and sometimes as trying as we expected; the language barrier, even in 5* international hotels can be difficult, for example, but we wouldn't have missed it for anything. Having said that, by the end of our time there, we felt we had had enough and were looking forward to joining the dear civilised Diamond Princess. She is a favourite of ours and we looked forward to the availability of usable loos, drinkable water, delicious, hot, recognisable food, and just basic, common courtesy.

But all that is for the next installment of our Travelogue: Asia Revisited - coming soon!