

A Memorable Journey

The journey I shall relate is one around China, or Zhōngguó as the Chinese themselves call it, that is “Central Country”; for in ancient times the Chinese saw themselves as the civilized “centre”, surrounded on all sides by barbarians.

I say nothing of the journey to or from China; these journeys were uneventful and not memorable, which is exactly how I like journeys by air to be. But the journey around the Central Country – or rather, around part of the Central Country, since China is so vast in size that I was not to travel all over it – is memorable.

We arrived at the capital, Běijīng, in time to relax and wander around until our evening meal in the revolving tower at the top of our hotel. This was our first meal in China and, like all the others we had during our three week journey, with the exception of Inner Mongolia, was excellent.

The next day our journey was not nearly so long as we stayed in Běijīng itself. Although it was hot the whole time we were in the city, we never once saw the sun.; the air was hazy with a hint of pollution. The day was a typical tourist sight-seeing day: a visit to Tiānānmén Square and the Forbidden City, then after lunch onto the Summer Palace and its park of lakeside pagodas, before going off to dinner and a stunning performance by the Peking Opera.

But the next day we did journey away from Běijīng to the Great Wall of China where we climbed our bit and had spectacular views along the restored sections frequented by tourists. On our return journey we stopped at the Ming Tombs, where 13 emperors lie buried. As we entered Běijīng we persuaded our guide to stop at the Olympic Park in the Cháoyáng district; we wandered around, photographing the Bird's Nest, the National Aquatics Centre and other buildings. At the time the future of the Bird's Nest was uncertain; our guide talked it about it possibly becoming a shopping mall. I do not know what has happened since.

The next day, after visiting the strange Temple of Heaven, we left Běijīng to fly south to Nánjīng, the former capital of the Chinese Republic. I am pleased to say that internal air-flights in China were as uneventful as the flights out and back from the country, though they were, of course, considerably shorter.

The next day we did much in and around Nánjīng, but the two most memorable things were the visits to the mausoleum of Dr Sun Yat-Sen and, later in the day, to the Nánjīng Massacre Memorial Hall.

Dr Sun Yat-Sen is remarkable in being considered “The Father of Modern China” by both the Communist mainland and by the Taiwanese Chinese Republic, and by being held in high honour by both. His mausoleum is also truly remarkable. It lies on the slope of the Purple Mountain and is approached by a long wwide stairway of 392 stairs covering some 700 metres or so; the building itself is magnificent, blending both the styles of traditional imperial tombs and of modern architecture. In the centre is seated a 4.6 metre high Italian marble statue of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, and north of the hall lies a bell-shaped vault, in which lies his sarcophagus.

The added thing that made this memorable was the sunshine. There was no haze here and the sun shone splendidly.

The Nánjīng Massacre Memorial Hall, however, is memorable for quite different reasons. The Hall commemorates the 300 000 civilians and unarmed soldiers massacred by Japanese troops during six or so weeks of rape, arson, looting, torture and mass executions that marked the beginning of the Japanese

occupation in December 1937. The Hall is tomb-like and half underground, and contains more than 1000 items related to the massacre. It is a sobering reminder of what notions of ethnic superiority and bigotry can lead to.

The next day we travelled on by bullet train, going along at speeds up to 200 kilometres an hour, to the delightful city of Sūzhōu, with its canals, temples and gardens. The bullet train was fast, smooth and comfortable; the signage in the carriage kept us informed of the speed. The smoothness of the journey did not give any hint of travelling at speed; it was only by looking through the window at the countryside passing by that one knew one was travelling fast. Sitting in comfort, being able to move around easily and seeing the varying countryside that we passed through made this so much more preferable to flying.

It is rather sad that in the country that invented and pioneered rail travel, we have only a small stretch of high-speed track from London St Pancras through to the Channel Tunnel before going onto Paris or Brussels.

We arrived in Sūzhōu in time for a trip along one of its canals and a rickshaw ride through one of the old parts of the city.

On the following day we visited some of the city's famous gardens as well as a silk factory before taking a short train ride to Shànghǎi, where we spent the following day visiting various sights including the famous Bund and the Jade Buddha Temple.

After spending a night in the city, we visited the Shànghǎi Museum of Urban Planning, before continuing our journey by flying to Wūhàn where a coach was waiting for us to take us on a five hour drive to Yíchāng, where we were to board a cruise boat for a trip up the Yangtze River.

I do not recall very much of the coach journey, except that as time went on it got darker and darker; it was well into the late evening when we got to Yíchāng and we saw almost nothing of the town.

When we woke up in the morning, we saw that we were not the only boat there. Soon after breakfast we started our cruise up the Yangtze. On this first day we had to stop at the Three Gorges Dam where we were able to leave the boat and wonder around the visitor sights. The dam is massive and very impressive and has to be seen to appreciate its scale properly.

Eventually we re-boarded our cruiser to go through a lock to the huge Three Gorges reservoir in the land flooded behind the dam. There are two sets of locks, each consisting of five stages, and each stage can take several ships at a time. It took a couple of hours or so to go through these stages. Then for the rest of the day, and the next two days we cruised through the three gorges – the Xíling, the Wū and the Qūtáng – with their magnificent and varied scenery. Every so often, we caught sight of farmers working small plots near the water's edge and waved to them.

Of the three gorges, the Qūtáng, though the shortest, is perhaps the most memorable for its fantastic rock formations and the weird hanging coffins of an ancient people in caves and on cliff ledges.

On our third day along the Yangtze we stopped off at Fēngdū Ghost City; this is a collection of buildings, structures, and statues related to underworld or hell of Chinese Buddhism. The models and paintings do not leave anything to the imagination and the tortures of hell are graphically portrayed. In one temple, Chinese were queuing up and paying money, presumably in the hope of winning merit to avoid being reborn in hell.

Our fifth day on the Yangtze brought us to Chóngqìng, where we

disembarked. After a short city tour and a visit to the zoo to see the pandas – not exactly active creatures, who seem to spend all their time munching bamboo – we went to the airport to catch a plane to Xī'ān.

After spending our first night in Xī'ān, we went to the emperor's funeral vault to see the amazing Terracotta Warriors. Although one has seen them on television and even visited the exhibition in London a few years back where some were on display, there is nothing that can prepare one for the truly awe-inspiring sight of some seven thousand life-sized model warriors, chariots and horses, all painstakingly reassembled from many thousands of fragments. This was agreed by most to be the highlight of our whole journey around eastern China.

What is more staggering is that what we saw and will always remember is only part of the whole necropolis of emperor Qín Shǐ Huáng of the late 3rd century BC. If ever the whole necropolis is excavated and the emperor himself found, I suspect I shall long have quitted this world.

In the afternoon we visited the old walls of the city which are impressive in themselves, but nothing as compared with the terracotta army. Then on the following day we travelled some 25 kilometres southwest to the Hùxiàn Farmers' Painting Village where, after being greeted by a dragon dance, we were shown a peasant's cottage and taken to view the paintings produced by local people. We returned to Xī'ān via the impressive Wild Goose Pagoda

On the next day we flew from Xī'ān back to Běijīng in time for a visit to one of the remaining hutongs, or traditional courtyard residences, before returning to the airport in the late afternoon for a flight to Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia.

After spending a night at a very good hotel, we were taken the next day by car northward across mile upon mile of the Mongolian grasslands which are flat and stretch as far the eye can see in all directions. Here and there we saw odd little groups of yurts, and wondered what ours would be like. Eventually, after a drive of 170 kilometres, we arrived at the Gegentala Grasslands Resort and were surprised to see rows upon rows of yurts; it reminded us of holiday caravan parks on English south coast resorts.

We were entertained with displays of Mongolian wrestling and horsemanship and spent a very pleasant night in our yurt with its en-suite facilities. I did wake up in time to see the sunrise over the grasslands before being given a substantial Mongolian breakfast. Then it was a car ride back to Hohhot in time to visit the Dàzhào Buddhist temple and the Hohhot Inner Mongolian Museum before spending our last night in China.

The following day was rather tedious – a flight back to Běijīng, and from there another flight back to Britain. So ended a very memorable journey around part of eastern China.