

Welcome to my blog posts from partlycloudy.co.uk, the travel journal I wrote when living in Singapore from 2012-2017. Not wanting to do away with website content, I've made PDFs of some of the posts and uploaded them here, to keep the adventures alive.

'Welcome aboard the multiple unit': nine days in China

Oct 18 2016

Half term of our fourth year in Singapore, and it's time to head to China. We fling ourselves from Beijing to Shanghai, clocking up five cities in nine days. It's a bit quick, but we need to grab what we can, conscious that the expat clock is ticking. By the time we get home we are completely ragged, but we've seen some amazing sights.

AIR

Beijing is our first stop, only five hours north of Sing and on the same timescale. It is October, and after Singapore's stultifying heat the weather here is crisp, breath-fogging. There's no haze, just blue skies, and it warms up as we head south so we get a cerulean blue backdrop for the Wall. In Xian we detect an ominous burning rubber smell, the haze after all, but it's only a bit cloudy. By the time we're in Shanghai, autumn is spring and the weather is humid. Our guide tells us people pay more to live in the suburbs not the town, a reverse situation to the UK 'norm'. Even so, from train rides across the countryside we see giant chimneys belching out coal dust.

CROWDS & SPACE

Not until you step foot in China do you realise why the country was named 中国, or 'Zhongguo', or 'middle nation', or 'centre of civilisation'. A country always thinks of itself as central, and China has scale on its side. Absolutely everything is a superlative: biggest, strongest, widest, longest, fullest. We begin to expect crowds and we come to understand that many tourists in these big cities are from the furthest corners of China. Most who get the chance to travel will probably only ever journey within the country's borders. This explains why everywhere is so hectic, because the tourist sites are not just full of people from other countries (like us) but also from within China itself. Another thing we grow accustomed to is being points of interest – it's not just the artifacts that everyone's looking at. Everywhere we go we attract open-mouthed starers who nudge each other and crane for a better view. We've had this before in other countries, but like most things in China this is all on a much bigger scale. It's clear that many people have never seen such big-nosed, pink-skinned, bug-eyed, cheese-scented people. If I'm honest, we're staring too, so pot-kettle-black.

CABS

Where? Ah, there. Going right past us, green light and all. Taxis are a viable means of transport here, and they are most definitely in plentiful use, but not for us. The language barrier makes it next to impossible to get one. We can't flag one down, and local drivers understandably don't want to be bothered with all of that. The one time we need one, Mr L gets around the issue by standing in the middle of the road, regardless of cars, tuk-tuks and bikes (yes, they go round him). Later we hop on the metro and it's a smooth, easy trip.

BIKES



"There are nine million bicycles in Beijing" croons Katie Melua, very annoyingly, in my head the whole time I am in this city and she's not wrong. There are bazillions of bikes and mopeds and rickshaws. Unlike in Vietnam, where we were told it was fine to step out into the traffic because the bikes would simply move around us (and they did), the idea here is to LOOKOUTFORTHELOVEOFGOD because traffic won't

stop. There are special bike lanes but they're shared with tuk-tuks and dust carts, so we need eyes all round our heads, and no one bothers with green 'walk' signs. What I do love is the bike gear. In chilly Beijing bikers wear body blankets, ingenious torso duvets covering bike and rider. I wonder how they steer but they do. Right at me.

DRAGON, LION, PHOENIX



Dragon is king, phoenix is queen, lion guards your house. A dragon with three claws belongs to a family, not an emperor. A lion with closed ears means he must not hear. If he is bright gold, that's a colour close to the royal emperor's yellow, so he must be very special. If the lion stands on a baby it is a mother lion. Paw on globe = daddy lion. How about sacred poultry? My sign, rooster, is a phoenix, and those bamboo plants by the river are

phoenix-tailed bamboo. By Day 9 we are exhausted with all the info but we can spot a dragon, phoenix or lion from a mile off. I knew some of this in advance, thanks to my tour guiding, but it is amazing to see it played out for real. However, don't get me started on the qilin, the crane or the bat, or we will be here for a very long time.

FOOD – 'Sauce explodes the dry flounder'

Belt noodles, juicy slices of duck, tangy hits of sweet and sour, crispy steamed greens, colourful sauces, chilli heat that prickles the tongue. Food in China is universally splendid. Some of it is reminiscent of stuff we've seen back home but this food is fuller, richer, purer. We eat in nice places but the snacky stuff is also good. Our only bad meal is down to skimpy content – a chicken hotpot consisting of claw, bones and gruel. We decline live stick snacks in markets. Wriggling scorpions, seahorses, star fish? Donkey? Bu hao, no thanks. The mistranslation of the sub-title here should not be tittered over. If it's what the menu promises, maybe the dry flounder really will explode? Chinese meanings are usually straightforward.



HOTELS

A mixed bag, but on the whole good. Our first is in a Beijing hutong (see below), local and elegant with a mahogany bed and red lanterns. We love the authenticity, even the ill-fitting wobbly doors that let in the chill. By contrast, our modern hotel in Guilin

has a mad waterfall cascading down the front that attracts crowds every night. The Xian hotel has a breakfast room smelling of vomit and the breakfast noodles aren't anything to write home about. The one in Shanghai has an impressive front but is nondescript. But sleep is the main thing, and we get lots of that wherever we are.

HUTONGS

First built by Mongolians, says our guide (verified by Wikipedia), these stone homes are villages within big cities, urban dwellings that were once densely populated but are now being torn down and built over. Some still remain down the narrow alleys, where grey walls give way to tiny houses. Some are offices, some are shops, some are hotels (we stayed in one), and some are still dwellings. People sit about playing chess and chatting, it is all very communal.



And another thing: at first we think Beijing has a very generous amount of public toilets. That is until we realise these conveniences – dotted about everywhere – are not for everyone. They are for hutong-dwellers, like the old lady shepherding a little girl down a hutong into a public bathroom one night. The tiny thing skips along in her PJs with granny chivvyng behind, bath bag in hand.

JINGHSAN PARK

We stumble across this massive patch of green in Beijing on day one. We've just arrived in China and already been turned loose from our tour guide. It's freezing so we walk to keep warm. Jonah spots the park on a map and decides it will be a good place to try some bottle-throwing ([yawn, remember that?](#) He did it all over the Great Wall as well). This is a hilly park full of boulder rocks from the building of the city moat. We trudge up to the park's peak, where a grand pagoda is thronged with crowds. We've timed it perfectly, it's sunset and we realise people have massed to take pictures of the red globe setting over the Forbidden City, which looks like a tiny miniature scale model from here. It's one of those brilliant just-arrived moments for a family that has flown through the night, had no sleep, then walked two miles in a chilly daze. The next day, when we get into the Forbidden City and turn around to look at the horizon, we see those same tiny ants taking daytime pics of the view from that hill.

FORBIDDEN CITY & TIANAMEN SQUARE

There is much to see in the infamous square en route to the royal city. We snap standing soldiers, flags and statues, endless groups following high flags across the vast grey concourse of the square. There is no escaping the austerity of the place where one of the world's biggest and most deadly political protests took place. In the security queue a soldier screams at a tourist to get back in line. Imagine that happening in Oxford Circus! It's like that here, so we'd better make sure we're in place. Once in the first gate of the Forbidden City, we can see the grandeur of the

place. "Do you think this is the main gate?" our guide is playful and asks the question every time we go through an entrance, of which there are very, very, very many on the way to the main palace. This enormous complex must have a squillion miles of iconic red and yellow tiled roofs, green dragons protecting every square inch. The reason for the



Emperor's grand chair carriages becomes obvious. No one that regal would think of walking these distances, especially after a congee fry-up. I like it here because, unlike the concubines who sat around the gardens all day writing poetry, painting and hoping for a pass to visit the Emperor, I know I can leave any time I like.

GREAT WALL



A quote on Tripadvisor says the Great Wall is just that: great, and I can't agree more. The first glimpse from ground level is heart-stopping and gives a sense of scale. If like me you're scared of heights you'll get your first clammy palm round about now. I've done my homework and am pre-warned. We take the cable car up into clouds and the first thing we spot is a mad steep section to the left, vertical. Ah yes, says our guide, that is not a nice section, but we're not going there. Our route is mainly down-steps with a few up sections, some almost empty. There's blue sky all around, and far-off glimpses of wall, distant hills, miles of wonky paving. We're soon scampering along, coats off. There is history and storytelling in them there bricks, and we hear it

as we walk. After a 2.5km stroll and no less than eight watchtowers, we have found our stride and made it to the end of the section. I decline the crazy toboggan ride back down. Instead I step into a two-person ski lift (which is vertiginous enough) with our guide. I enjoy the gentle swinging descent, craning to spot my two boys bombing beneath us on plastic sledges. Nutters.



XIAN CITY WALL

We hire bikes and cycle round Xian's old city walls, which amounts to 13k. They say it's a great way of seeing the city but in fact we don't see a lot. One side of the wall is too high, and the rest of the time we're trying not to fall off or hit pedestrian tourists. It's cobbled and there are lots of ramps, but it's a lot of fun. And it's here that we spot some beautiful azure-winged magpies for the first time, powder blue and very fast. I don't even know what they are until I get back to my emails and message Dad to look it up. He says they're only found in Spain, Portugal and China, which makes us feel doubly lucky to have been treated to a sighting.

TERRACOTTA WARRIORS



A friend visits the site not long before us, and reports back: there are no words. She's not wrong. But this is a blog and so I must find some. The well-worn route around the Warriors site is jam-packed with people. Crowds make it hard to understand the point of it, clogging up the narrow entrance to the great hall. But then a space clears, and there they are. Lines and lines of stone figures, standing by their horses, hands curled around

imaginary wooden sabres (the real wooden ones having long since crumbled, leaving the men holding nothing but air). Again, the scale is overwhelming. There is another shed with warriors that are partially uncovered. And then a shed with horses, and then a shed with mounds not yet dug up, the promise of more to come. Our guide wryly points out this carrot-on-a-stick method of tempting visitors to return. We don't care, in fact we're happy to be steered into the shop to spend in a haze of warrior wonderment. Our three tiny soldiers now stand in my mother-in-law's teak corner cabinet. And our bronze dragon is on the piano, claws poised to bash out a sonata. [A note here](#): only in China would we ever get the chance to meet the person who discovered the warriors. On our way in he is parked in the bookshop ready to sign copies. We decline politely. Until our exit, that is, when we ask our guide to take us back to meet him. We buy the book, take pictures, get his signature. Amazing.



RIVER LI

You know the pointy mountains you see in black-ink pictures when "China" needs illustrating? The guide on our boat trip fishes out a 20 yuan note: it is stamped with the same view on our route from Guilin to Yangshuo. River Li is beautiful, gorgeous, serene, and so are the mountains and the green banks of fluffy phoenix bamboo and the clear, bubbling waters. Yes it's busy, tons of pleasure boats like ours chugging up and down. But our boat finds gaps where we can only see bamboo skiffs, water buffalo taking a dip, farmers on the banks. It is stunning and calls to mind a trip my parents made a few years before, which was apparently just as gorgeous. I remember them talking about this area as a high point. The cruise takes five hours thanks to shallow dry season waters. I'm happy to get off



in Yangshuo, where we cycle down country lanes, just the three of us and our guide, with those stunning needle mountains ever present as a picturesque backdrop.

PEARL TOWER

I like a bit of warning before a crowd crush, especially when I'm tired and cranky. So taking me straight off a flight, shoving me into a 45-minute queue, then up several hundred feet to the top of a packed and vertiginous viewing room is not going to put me in a brilliant mood. Poor tour guide, we don't get off to a great start. Luckily, the sight of Mr L and Jonah edging onto the glass-bottomed ledge at the top of the Pearl Tower cheers me right up. No, of course I didn't try it, I'm not THAT cured. Shanghai is our final destination, that much closer to Singapore and a touch more modern with something of a New York-Paris-Rome vibe. All fine, but I am missing Beijing already.



LANGUAGE

We try, OK? From day one – on our own in a hutong restaurant – and at any chance in shops, cafes, museums, we try. The longest sentence I manage is: "My husband is over there". Sadly, it comes out as "our husband is here" but the ticket-checker understands. We manage a few scattered words and the rest is hand gestures. After 2.5 years of learning Mandarin, we are a bit sad to not manage longer sentences, but also a little bit thrilled to have got to the point of being able to say anything at all.*

TOUR COMPANY

We've done tours before, short trips with reputable companies. When we booked China I remembered how useful other tours had been, if slightly staged, in giving us guidance. From Arrivals in Beijing to Departures in Shanghai, we are met at each place by a guide and taken around town, fed lunch and, most importantly, treated to stories about the history and culture of China. The four tour guides – one for each city – wear their own clothes and have their own approach and their own versions of the legends. They vary in attitude, age, and usefulness, but are on the whole very good. It's not for everyone, this tour thing, but it helps here and we have the evenings free to do as we like, trying to get by with menu-picking and directions. One guide uses his Subway loyalty card to get access to a car park at the Great Wall. Another bargains for a better bike for Jonah when we cycle through Yangshuo. One tells amazing tales of long-ago dragon ladies. Another is cynical about the legends and prefers to talk about the current way of life in city and town, which to be honest is just as interesting. By Day 5 I have hit an information wall but I get my mojo back next day when the scenery changes. That's the thing with dashing about – always another view round the corner.

TRAINS – 'Welcome aboard the multiple unit'

This is the silky voiceover relayed every time we pull out of one of the 12 stops between Beijing and Xian. In Beijing West station there are hints of Japan about the pointy bullet trains waiting nose-forward beside the enormous platforms. There is an organised code about the way it works. A station buzzer signals boarding, neatly uniformed assistants help you on and get your bags sorted (nothing heavy on

overhead racks please), and then patrol the aisles. From sunset and on through the night, we whizz the 1000km route at 300km per hour, a slight leaning shake the only clue as to our speed. First Class was never going to give us a realistic impression of real life but it's not as 'first' as UK trains. Still we get comfy seats and snacks packs with plain bun, dry cracker, bag of dried peas. And we signal "more please" to freeflow hot green tea from big iron kettles. The train slides along, pulls into dark towns with neon skyscrapers. I wish I could try all the stops on this multiple unit.

SNOT

I do have to mention it, sorry. Day 9, last day, last lunch, and Jonah is restless, tutting. Only when he pushes his plate away and growls out: "Why do we have to keep HEARING that?!" do I realise that someone is hacking snotballs and it's putting him off his noodles. I've become deaf to the sound. It's a noise that's totally commonplace, though our younger guide with her western leaning does agree the habit could be seen as unpleasant to some. In the end, it's not until a meeting with some expat English friends that we find out how equally disgusting we appear to the locals, many of whom think that the habit of sniffing our nasal waste into tissues is worse. I don't know. I'm not happy when – scaling the stone steps of Xian's city walls – I accidentally brush past a gob of drool hanging off the railings. Anyone need a tissue?

ONE MORE THING...

In 1994 – 22 years before I came to China – I was obsessed with the TV documentary *Beyond The Clouds* by a man called Phil Agland. Cameras had been given access to rural China and the small town of Lijiang. The town is now a tourist spot, but back then it was the China of olde, and cameras followed a doctor, policeman, teacher and handful of other characters as they went about their business. At the time I was transfixed, hanging on the haunting whistled theme tune each week to see the next instalment of local life in that smoky, cobbled town. When planning our China trip, the documentary came back into my head, so I tracked down a couple of episodes on YouTube and found the makers online. They had just made a new series, I was happy to see. How eerie that they should let me know this as I cruise the River Li. I don't see the message until I get back to Singapore: it is quite the best homecoming gift ever.*



*Re-reading these blogs eight years later, in 2024, I'm thrilled to find I can still work out that phrase, including its inaccuracies. Don't stand my chances in another eight years, though.

** I kept in touch with [Phil Agland and River Films](#) on Twitter (now X) for a while after writing this and watched his new series, which of course I loved.