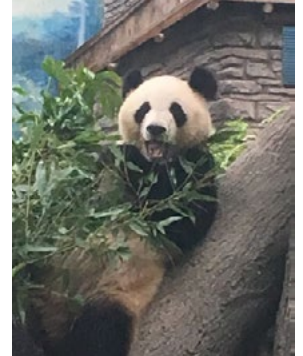


Ni Hao (Hello)!

Our incredible journey began as we met at the airport for a 1:00 am Air China direct flight on May the 16th. We arrived in Beijing early on Thursday the 17th, and since it would be awhile before our rooms were ready, we opted for a tour to the Temple of Heaven.



A place where many locals gather in the surrounding park for Tai Chi, board games, line dancing, badminton and more. Then we were on our way to the Beijing Zoo to see adorable pandas lunching on bamboo. That night we enjoyed a welcome dinner hosted by Li Bo (American name Oscar), our fabulous tour guide. It was the first of many Chinese “Lazy Susan” meals where sticky rice and assorted bowls of chicken, beef and vegetables were served. Since the bowls seemed to keep coming, it was at first difficult to know when the meal would end. Eventually they served watermelon for dessert and we learned (just like “the opera ain’t over ‘til the fat lady sings”), that the meal is over once the watermelon is served!



Our first full day in Beijing started with one of the daily full breakfasts, including Chinese and Western style. Luckily the sky was clear due to rain the day before and we were off to visit the famous Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, an architectural masterpiece and home to the National Palace Museum.



We were pleased to find a 4-star bathroom – Western style, with paper and a lid! After lunch and a stop at a pearl store where we saw a fresh water pearl demonstration (20 pearls in one oyster!) we traveled to the Summer Palace where we rode a dragon boat to the summer resort of the Empress Dowager.

On Saturday, May 19, we ventured outside the city - after a quick “shoppertunity” at a jade store - to the legendary Great Wall which extends nearly 4000 miles. Thirteen of us climbed to the top of the wall which was a challenge in itself. Afterwards, my tracker had recorded 2.8 miles walked, 7221 steps and 49 flights climbed, whew! At the base, we got to enjoy bargaining with the local vendors selling a variety of Chinese souvenirs.



Next, we visited the Ming Tombs, a burial site of 13 Emperors of the Ming Dynasty. In the evening, we enjoyed a Peking Duck dinner followed by a “Legend of Kung Fu” show, featuring music and martial arts at the Red Theater.

On Sunday, we ventured out to Beijing’s ancient back alleys and took a Pedicab ride before having lunch in a family home in Hutong where we were surprised with a show by “Mr. Cricket”.



We then stopped at the Beijing Tong Ren Tang Pharmacy of Traditional Chinese Medicine for a foot reflexology massage. The next day, we boarded our short flight to Xian, the ancient capital of China for eleven dynasties. It was Monday the 21st when we got to experience one of the world's most amazing archaeological discoveries, a life-size Terra Cotta Army of soldiers and horses guarding the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi. At night we enjoyed a delicious dumpling dinner prior to a spectacular folklore show featuring music, dances and costumes from the Tang Dynasty.



In the morning, we visited the Tangbo Art Museum to learn calligraphy of Chinese characters before we were off to the airport for our flight to Shanghai.



On Wednesday, May 23, we embarked on a guided stroll down the Bund, the bustling waterfront along the Huangpu River, then visited Chinatown before we strolled through the scenic ponds, pavilions and walkways of the 16th century Yu Yuan Garden.



We had a tea ceremony at the Yu Shanghai Tea House before some had lunch at a local noodle house (others opted to try a taste of home at the local McDonald's).



Our afternoon excursion took us to the former French Concession, a premier residential and retail district of Shanghai, before we went to the MagLev (Magnetic Levitation) Train station where we took a short ride on the world's fastest train, topping out at 431 km/h or 268 mph. After dinner, we got to experience the breathtaking performance of the renowned Shanghai Acrobats (sorry, no photos allowed! :)



On our final day, we journeyed about two hours outside the city to the charming, canal laced Suzhou often called the Venice of the East. We took a short cruise on the ancient "Grand Canal" then a walk of the old town. Next, we visited a silk factory followed by lunch and a visit to the Master of Nets Garden, one of Suzhou's most famous Chinese gardens.



We had a final delicious dinner with the locals, our last “Lazy Susan” meal of the trip. Afterwards, many of us opted for a nighttime Huangpu River Cruise, the cherry on the sundae to top off this incredible adventure!



We departed Friday, May 25 for our return flight home.

I think everyone would tell you that this tour exceeded all expectations. A ding ding hao (wonderful) trip! It was a pleasure to be the trip leader for this group of 22 accomplished travelers (or “Smart People” as referred to by our exceptional tour guide): Vicki Faulkner, Pat Musemeche, Ross Baker, Craig Campbell, Cecilia Newburn, Sandy Schneider, Ron Rambin, Roberta Rambin, Jo Ann Zemlicka, Alan Simpson, Diane Stotz, David Stotz, Kim Hlavinka, Anne “Pearls” Thomas, Patricia Salinas, Sandy Upchurch, Patti Richards, Tom Hogle, Terry Gray, Beverly Vosko, Alice Allbritton and Dale Allbritton.

We would recommend you all take the opportunity to visit China one of these days. The Chinese aren’t much on wine or desserts, but there’s always plenty of beer, lots of watermelon, abundant flowers (not to mention bicycles), friendly folks (who loved taking pictures with tourists) and much much to see. Just don’t forget your hat and other “essentials”!

