

## **GUILIN – SOUTHERN CHINA**

It's going to be a long-haul – like 30 hours and I have forgotten to put my “compression stockings” on. Embarrassed at doing this in the departure lounge, I sneak off to a toilet. With arthritis and titanium hips it is something of a feat to actually reach down that far so I sit on the seat in my pants and slip about a bit as I manipulate. The toilet flushes automatically! I continue my struggle, get one sock off, a stocking on, replace the sock – and the toilet flushes again. I begin the second leg with the toilet flushing again. Just as I get the second stocking nearly on the toilet flushes again – and the lights go off! It seems four flushes and you are timed out!

Completing the manoeuvre in the darkness and with socks ill fitting, I return to my travel partners. Fifteen of us in all and we are heading first to Guilin in China. Guilin is a “sister city” of our Hastings neighbouring city in Hawkes Bay and a one-time City Councillor, who has made the journey many times, is our tour guide.

Our first stop over is Hong Kong and after about ten hours we reach there an hour early. No advantage in that for we had to “layover” at the airport for seven hours anyway! As departure time eventually approaches, we find our outwards flight delayed a further hour or so. Anyway it gives us ample opportunity to explore this amazing airport for it is the first time that we have been to the “new” one. It seems of huge size and very well laid out.

However there are only a limited number of things you can do while awaiting your plane, and we begin to tire of it. Finally we board our aircraft, only to learn that we have now “lost our place in the queue” and must sit there for another hour to pick up a spot for take-off. As we watch take-offs and landings, each about every two minutes (and on two runways) it eventually happens and we head off on the hour and a half trip to Guilin.

A Chinese tour guide meets us and takes us to our bus and driver who will accompany us for the rest of the week. Moving out of the airport I cannot help but notice the beautiful landscaping that adorns the entrance. After about 20 minutes we are in the heart of the city – and the gardens are exactly the same! The whole city it seems, is landscaped with trees and shrubs, the like of which would match anything I have seen anywhere else in the world.

We reach our hotel about 9pm – which is 1am NZ time, and we have been travelling for some 32 hours. Needless to say, we are quickly unpacked and into bed. A hearty breakfast the next morning, kind of revives us. While there is ample Chinese cuisine, I find some good old bacon, eggs and beans!

Our first venture out in the bus follows soon after and we are quickly at the edge of the city and begin to travel through what seems like a *Palmer's Garden Centre* for the next 15 minutes! Then we get further out and the landscape changes to farms with onions and runner beans interspersed with rice paddies. I see one farmer using a rotary hoe, immersed up to his knees in water.

All of this travel takes place on a road that seems the width of about one lane – but with traffic going both ways! In some places (nearer the city) there are only single lanes for cars, trucks and buses – but motor cycles travel both ways anyway! This can be quite alarming – especially if you are walking, for the motor cycles are mainly scooters and most are electric. They make no sound and so you don't hear them coming. To add to the confusion, at night time many do not use their lights – as they seek to save power for their electric motor!!

Our mission on the first day is to visit a pig farm. We have snack at the owner's home or office (I think) and he explains how he has established his company and also set up standards which have now been adopted by the pig farming industry right across the country. After explanations we drive

to a nearby property and see beautiful new sheds that he has built and that will accommodate thousands of pigs, some for pork and some for selling for breeding. Surprisingly (I thought) he could not take us to the actual sheds where pigs were kept for the newly set “standards,” are so high that had we been admitted to the area, we could have contaminated it!

This journey also included a visit to a city market – the likes of which we had never seen before. Fresh food, fruit, meat (including some of animals you would not believe) and trinkets. It was an experience in itself, watching the local people do their shopping and socializing.

After some local sightseeing we return to our hotel for a Chinese buffet and then Eleanor and I celebrated our wedding anniversary with a cruise down the river – and took all the others with us! The lighting display and on-river and on-shore entertainment as we passed by was incredible.

Our next day on the road saw us visit the Reed Flute Cave. The stalagmites and stalactites were quite incredible, beyond anything one sees at Waitomo Caves in Waikato and the rather celebrated ones we have visited at Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, U.S. (and way beyond those at Takaka Hill in Nelson!) Oddly enough, we had another Chinese Buffet meal – and each such meal always includes (in the pre-paid price) a glass of coke, sprite or beer. Not many took the sprite or coke! Our journey back to the hotel included the “traditional” trip to a silk shop where we learned, not only about how the silk is produced, but also about how to spend a lot of money buying the end products!

While I’m losing track of time, I think it is about day three on the road when we head off out into the country in our bus and then join a three hour river cruise (along with thousands of tourists) in dozens of “somewhat similar” boats. This was quite an adventure, travelling through the country side, seeing horses, water buffalo and duck farms on the shores. Recent flooding in the area (and earlier seen on our TV in NZ) meant the river was dirty and evidence of its peak was seen with the rubbish in trees along the riversides. Surprisingly, there were workers making their way along the banks collecting all of this rubbish. (I tell you – this place is kept clean!!!)

We reach our destination of Yanshuo and find it pouring with rain. Umbrellas and rain capes come out of our bags and we fight through the trinket sellers to make our way up town. Needing “western” toilets our guides take us to KFC where we consume a very small meal while using the facilities. While I have not examined the ladies toilets, I can assure you they are not “western” but rather the local “squat” style. One of our number had something of a mishap on the wet floor (rain maybe??) and struggled to get up and out of a locked cubicle where everyone within call at that time, spoke a different language. I am personally looking after the “injured” party and all is well.

A key event in this town, and the reason we were there, is an evening concert (in fact two of them) and we get the first after (believe it or not) another Chinese feast at a local hotel. This show was spectacular. Staged in a sort of natural “amphitheatre” with the stage being a sea of water beneath us! Acts came and went, all of it on rafts, kayaks or other similar water craft! The sound and lighting effects were superb. After a little over an hour, it finished and we made our way to dozens of buses to leave as the next crowd (each was 1000) made their way in. A long trip back to town saw many weary travellers “snoring.”

Day Five (Saturday) was a “free-day” and we all sought to catch up in things, including correspondence, laundry and sleep! We all got together in the evening – for a Chinese meal and a chance to say farewell to our local guide. Early to bed though for we had to check out at 6am the next morning. Weary travellers, we met in the foyer – and received a “breakfast bag” with sufficient food to last a couple of days! I ate hot bacon and sausage on the way to the airport – and that was only ¼ of the “provisions.” We encountered thunderstorms as we loaded the bus and as we drove to the airport and unloaded. The whole procedure, including check-in, took so long they were about to close the plane doors as we boarded – just in time!

We have a one hour 50 minute flight. Xi’an (and terracotta warriors) here we come....

