

CHINA – “BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME!!!”

Our first “solo trip” on the journey and I have the uneasy feeling it could be my last trip - ever! We have left our tour group and head to the airport in Chongqing for we have an earlier flight (to Korea) and they are going elsewhere. The driver is going at breakneck speed, as if we were desperate to catch a flight rather than cling to life. But – let me back up the cab a bit. I will come back to it – if we make the airport!

We left off last week as we finished in Guilin. It was difficult to imagine how Dereck, our tour guide, could come up with something that could beat what we had seen there – but he did! We fly to Xi’an, another beautiful city, where we visit a “city wall” 14 kilometres long which enclosed the original settlement several hundred years ago and then we headed off to a Chinese feast and cultural show (front row seats). Our main mission though is *Terracotta Warriors*. We learn that an Emperor (Qin Shi Huang) of some thousands of years ago, set out to wage war in China so that he could “unify” the country! (Actually, this doesn’t sound so unfamiliar today even.)

As an aside, he felt that for protection in the “afterlife” he should have an army of soldiers to look after him so he set about having them created. During the enduring six thousand years they became covered over and only discovered again by a farmer digging a well about 50 years ago – and the rest is history as they say. He no longer has a farm - and the site is now one of the most famous heritage sites in the world.

Buildings are erected over three separate “digs” and visitors can walk around seeing what has been restored and what is still being developed. All in all, it is quite incredible. On a good day 80,000 people visit the site. We also saw the 6000 year old buried Ban Po Neolithic Village, a few kilometres away.

Time does not stand still and we move on to Beijing, a city of some 25 million people, so our new Chinese guide tells us. While famous for “Peking Duck,” this is not all we come to see. First up we do Tiananmen Square and the adjoining Forbidden City – historic places only before dreamed about. The next day is the Great Wall, or some parts of it (it goes for a few thousand kilometres) a little way out into the country. We travel to this in our bus and find several thousand other people have the same intention!

I must say though, that the organisation that manages these numbers, is very efficient and we make our way up a section of wall allocated to our tour. It is no easy feat – especially with titanium hips! I make it up some 380 steps to our allocated pagoda and take pictures to prove it (plus get an engraved plaque with my Chinese name “*Ho Lee Oak*” on it. The biggest difficulty in the climb would seem to be the complete lack of “building standards” at construction, and the *tread* and *rise* are by no means uniform. This makes for very dangerous manoeuvres.

To cap off Beijing, we visit the site of the Olympic Games there a few years back and walk around the outside of some of the amenities. As with elsewhere, thousands of other people are doing the same. We also take in a Peking Duck Dinner and a Kung Fu show – but no Panda! Spectacular though.

Instead of flying to our next “target” we use the “fast train.” With a journey of around five hours, most of it covered at just over 300km per hour, we cover the distance to Shanghai quickly and in style. Despite the considerable distance, we rarely seem to leave the built up area. Sure there are farms dotted along the rail line, but nothing that appears big, rather small allotments for market gardens and rice paddies. Spread fairly evenly among this rural area, are several groups of multi storied buildings – presumably apartments for people who must work the nearby farms. Many of these buildings appeared unoccupied as yet, and many to are still under construction. “*Build it and they will come*” perhaps.

We reach Shanghai and a new Chinese guide. Fortunately NZ guide Dereck has done this trip several times and knows each of the guides personally. One gets the immediate impression that Shanghai is the most “westernised” city of our visit, this being evident in the people, the vehicles and the buildings. Interestingly, since we drive a Chinese built “*Great Wall*” SUV at home, I wondered if there might be a factory near the real wall where they built them! There was not but in Shanghai certainly, we spotted a number of *Great Wall SUV*’s in the streets. Every other type of car is present on the Chinese roads, some of them readily identifiable, and some of them that look familiar, but seem to have different names! We visit the famous Oriental Pearl TV Tower, take Chinese tea in the Yu Yuan Gardens and see an amazing aerobatics show at night.

The final section of our tour is to ride the Yangtze River, one of the famous waterways of the world and, I think, the third largest river. Obviously we cannot cover it all but we leave Shanghai on the super-fast “Maglev” train (no rails – it works by levitation - I think). It only did 300 kph for us (but is said to go much faster) and took us to the airport in eight minutes where we boarded and headed for Yichang. A flight delay (we sat in the plane for an hour again – but ate lunch!) meant we missed a Chinese feast at the end so we had to survive on what we had already eaten that day (which was easy).

We board our ship which is not unlike those on European rivers we used last year, but not perhaps as modern or well finished. It is very smart though and our cabin has a tiny balcony that looks out onto the river. Breakfast, lunch and dinner, taken in a smart dining room, are “buffet style” and with “western offerings” at breakfast time. Our first stop on the river is the Three Gorges Dam, said to be the largest water retention project in the world. While the dam itself is perhaps only a couple of kilometres across (last year we saw one seven kilometres wide in South America) the water storage lake behind the dam is around 600kms long!

This is a massive structure and with four or five double locks at the side for us to pass through to carry on up the river. We are told that 1.4 million people were displaced by the nine year filling of the massive lake! Surprisingly, irrigation is not the main reason for this dam, but rather flood prevention, hydro-electricity and the water transportation system. Passenger ships and freight barges are numerous.

We continue on for four days, visiting various small villages, bargaining for trinkets and souvenirs and seeing a number of scenic attractions. Each day a visit to a tourist attraction is included in our fare and as well another option is offered at extra cost. In the evening shows are put on in the upstairs lounge. As well as that, you can just stand or sit, at the side of the ship and watch a great part of China pass by. It is unbelievable. There are towns, cities and massive high-rise buildings all along the river. There are dozens of enormous bridges crossing the river, some of them almost of Auckland Harbour Bridge dimensions. There are huge highways running near some parts of the river but, unlike the cities, very few vehicles are on them. Many buildings and bridges are still under construction. *“Build it and they will come”* perhaps!

Our final port is Chongqing, home port of the shipping company (*Victoria Cruises*) and of our guide – who tells us there are over 30 million people in this city and that it is the largest city in the world! We thought Beijing and Shanghai (at 25 million were big) and have never heard of this place before! It is time to move on though. Our group splits up here and we go in different directions.

Our Chinese Cruise Director arranges a “porter” to take our bags from the ship and up about two hundred steps and 20 metres in height. The porter appears to be about 1.5 metres tall and weighing about 40 Kgs – the same as our bags. He swings them on a bamboo poll over his shoulder and he makes off to the taxi stand that he is already in touch with by mobile phone.

Actually it is not a real taxi - probably his brother driving a van! As we reach it the porter demands 100 yuan for what we were told would be 30. We argue – I win. The “driver” wants 150 yuan for the airport and that is within my estimate. At 8.30 in the morning it is chaotic. Honking, yelling, pushing in, swerving, “u turns” – the lot. I fell decidedly unsafe. We reach the Domestic Terminal – but we want International. The driver gets out to ask directions!! We make it to the Domestic, find the entry point and then have no idea where to go next. It seems you cannot proceed from a sort of “holding area,” until your flight comes up on the screen as “time to check in.” Since we have broken all speed records getting there, we have more than an hour to wait. Groups of hundreds of people are gathering. There are a few dozen seats and one food place! This is nothing like the mighty airports we have seen before. As we proceed through, eventually, we see dozens and dozens of planes on the tarmac, with buses taking passengers from the building to the aircraft. Only a few planes are connected to air bridges. Ours is thank goodness.

We have finished China. Much has been seen and wondered at. We did not see all of the 1.5 billion people, but a good number of them. I am surprised at the transport, so much of it but not many trucks, never anything like a “B Train” but rather smaller trucks and clearly with no “weight limit” rules! The largest we saw was a couple of “car transporters” with eight cars (all medium sized) on the bottom tray and two rows of eight, side by side on the top tray! The only traffic rule seems to be to stop at red lights (generally) and otherwise it is *free for all*. Pedestrian crossings are just artwork and a six point “U turn” by buses in multi-lane streets is not at all unusual. What an incredible country, moving ahead very rapidly, a world power to be recognised. Now - we are off to Korea.....



Terracotta Warriors

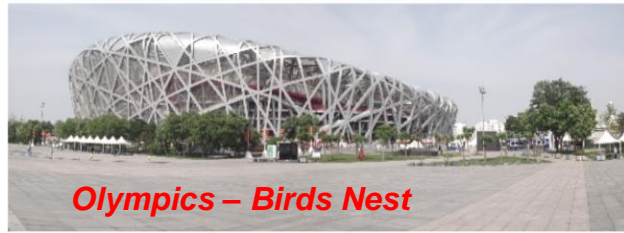
Tiananmen Square



The Great Wall



Olympics – Birds Nest



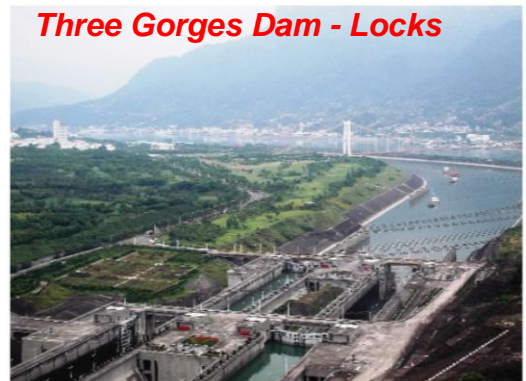
Shanghai



Three Gorges Dam



Three Gorges Dam - Locks



Red Pagoda



Yu Yuan Gardens

