

China- First visit, first impressions



Arrival in Shanghai

We went with a tour group (United Vacations, which actually uses Majestic Vacations). Very inexpensive; \$879/person 9 nights/10 days in very fancy (to me) hotels. Ridiculously-fancy for my tastes. I would strongly recommend going with a tour group the first time, but subsequent visits that shouldn't be necessary. There are no issues with it being a "Communist"/closed/ultra-secure country. Maybe if you were venturing off into Tibet? But there was complete freedom of movement, no obvious taboo subjects, no feeling at all that Big Brother is watching over you (although I'm sure, to some extent, they are).

The country is moving FAST. Faster than you can possibly imagine. That's one of the things I really like about China. You get the feeling that if you slow down, you're going to get run over. There's also what appears to be a strong work ethic, something we traditionally have believed is fundamental to the western world and foreign to countries where you're pretty much guaranteed a job. But China is a curious hybrid, undergoing an incredible transformation from the Mao era into something rather extraordinary.

For those of us in our 50s, who grew up with strong memories of the cold war and China's "Cultural Revolution"... wow. What an eye-opener. As I was standing in front of the viewing stands of Tiananmen Square, I had this feeling I'd been there before. And I had. Every "National Day" (October 1st?) when the Chinese Army would parade en masse down the street, with all of their big ICBMs on trailers. Just like Red Square in Moscow. And now? Our economies are hopelessly intertwined, such that we fear China economically, but not militarily. I think that's a good thing. I think. The problem is that they adopt and adapt at a pace that we can't keep up with. They're intensely curious, well-schooled and have a sense of national pride based upon a long history.

You want contrast? Compare China to Egypt. China had been one of the great civilizations of the world, and they're coming back. Maybe they just slept for a while. Egypt? How would you like to live in a country where your best days were thousands of years behind you, where your own people are less-interested in your history than archeologists from the West?

China is in control of its destiny. What it has not got a handle on is its growth. You would think that a country that has pioneered social engineering to the extreme (such as limits on number of kids you can have) could better deal with pollution. You'd think. It's hard to know what they're waiting for; the pollution in Beijing and sometimes Shanghai is so bad that a "good" day in those cities rates as a "spare the air" day here. Huge coal-fired power plants next to hi-rise apartments, and people just accept it. New cities springing up overnight with only roads, not public transit, connecting them to their jobs. It's nuts. I asked how (in Xi'an) the infrastructure could possibly support the tens of thousands of people moving in every month. Just build

more roads. Car ownership and driving is something that the Chinese have gone nuts for and are willing to sacrifice a lot to get. Again, this is where I don't understand why the central government doesn't exert more control.

As was said by a customer of ours, the answer to most of the puzzling things about China is always "TIC." As in, "This Is China." That's just how it works. Or doesn't.

To say that people were friendly is an understatement. Anyone thinking about visiting China, do not do so thinking you'll be in fear of anything in any way. Except maybe the 6-hour bout my wife and I had (on separate days) that had us embracing the porcelain god. That was not fun. Be careful about what you eat, particularly in buffets. And if I never, ever again smell cooked cabbage, I'll be perfectly happy.

Oh, and Chinese food? You'll be disappointed to learn it's pretty much exactly what you get at a Chinese restaurant in the US. You can be adventurous if you wish, but it would be helpful to have a large party with someone who understands the menu and order a lot of interesting things. Unfortunately, that's not how tour groups work.

Shanghai. What can I say about a place that surprised me so greatly? Something different around each corner, hidden gems in alleys, modern hi-tech shopping districts and intense markets where bargaining is taken to new heights. After a few days you start getting used to things and you really don't need the "safety" of being in a tour group and gradually start becoming more comfortable with how the bargaining works such that you might only be paying 3x what you need to instead of 10 or 20. It's not a way I'd ever be comfortable running a business, where it's important to me to establish the value and live up to that value.

Blade Runner. See the movie again, and you've seen some aspect of China. I don't think anything is impossible in China. Who would ever think you'd say that about a "Communist" country? That's what America is supposed to be!

Oh, right, the Cultural Revolution. In a country where Mao is regarded as a God, the Cultural Revolution, something those of us in our 50s were exposed to and taught that was what made China so different (and so wrong) from the Western world... they regard the Cultural Revolution as the biggest single mistake in Chinese history. And yet Mao is still a God. They blame it on his wife at the time. Seriously. And I think that explains one of the reason China is moving so fast. They are willing to admit to mistakes and move on.