

A JOURNEY TO THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

CHINA 1-14 October, 2010

30 September, 2010 (Thursday): Our flight was scheduled to depart Seattle for San Francisco on October first, at 06:00 AM, early enough that we elected to leave home in University Place the day before and stay overnight near the Airport. We drove to *Americas Best Value Inn* just a couple of miles from SEATAC. For just 200 dollars we got two rooms for one night, 14 days of motel parking- and a free shuttle to the airport at 03:30 the next morning- a very good deal.

1 October, 2010 (Friday): United-468 (an Airbus A-319) to San Francisco took off about 40 minutes late, which was no problem since we had a nearly four hour layover at SFO's international terminal's gate G98. Finally UA-889, a Boeing 747-400, departed the North American continent at 11:51 AM.

The flight was a long twelve hour grind that took us over The Aleutians, and Russia's Kamchatka peninsula before bending down over northern the city of Harbin in northern China then down to *Beijing*. This United flight had the best service of any flight I've been on- friendly, with good food... and unlimited alcoholic beverages.

2 October, 2010 (Saturday): The Beijing airport was large and clean with signage in Chinese characters... and in English. Even when confused there was always a Chinese airport worker or fellow traveler nearby who overheard us and helped out. The hotel transfer arrangements made by our travel agent didn't materialize leaving us abandoned in baggage claim. The airport information desk called but got only a recording. So we pro-

ceeded outside to the taxi stand and hired a van; the transaction so confusing it left us wondering where we were going and how much it would cost. In our exhausted state it was hard to say how long the trip took.

Traffic was heavy and drivers sped up, slowed down or changed lanes, seemingly at random. And our driver, honking and tailgating was pushing all the time. Road signs were in Chinese characters with English and place names in *Pinyin* (Roman characters) below. Any English speaker crazy enough to drive in Beijing could find his way around. We arrived at the *Ritz Carlton Hotel* in Beijing's financial district shaking- but alive and in one piece.

The hotel was expecting us! On top of that *Charles Wang*, our *Viking* tour guide called to let us know the tour would start as scheduled on Monday, Oct 4th, at 06:30 in the *Green Fish room*.

3 October, 2010 (Sunday): We tried, with varying degrees of success, to catch up on sleep and re-sync our Circadian Rhythms. The *Ritz-Carlton* is a 20 story high-rise located in Beijing's financial district. It's a wonderful hotel with large impeccable rooms and a great staff. After breakfast in the hotel we walked around town. Since it was Sunday and a national holiday, the financial district was nearly empty, the weather a bit windy but clear, temperature in the low 70's.

The whole financial district, called *Financial Street* is exquisitely clean, beautifully manicured and surrounded by interlinked small parks. Family's with small children (mostly one child per family) were strolling along, or playing near the many

fountains. We also managed a little shopping in an up-scale five level shopping center near (actually connected to) our hotel. Nice, but expensive

Nearly everyone we met was friendly and tried to be helpful. As we were walking- a man holding his son on the opposite side of the street called out “hello” to us and waved his son’s hand. We waved back. We were beginning to find out... foreigners are popular.

4 October, 2010 (Monday): The tour began today. We met our Tour Guide- *Charles Wang*, in the hotel lobby, got our name tags and boarded our bus. It took about 45 minutes to reach the *Tiananmen Square*, at 100 acres the worlds largest. It was also full “a word that doesn’t do justice to “*no room left*). The locals were enjoying their national holiday. The square is said to be able to hold a million people and I believe it. There were large digital displays in the square with patriotic themes. Many people wore red baseball hats and carried the Chinese flag- a large yellow star in the upper left corner with four smaller attending stars on a red background.

Crossing the square and passing under the watchful eye of *Chairman Mao*, we entered the *Forbidden City*, 175 acres and completed in 1420. The complex includes 800 “Grand Buildings” with exactly 9,999 rooms (a very lucky number). It just goes on and on and on and on... And there were so many people! Yet even in such crowds, folks were well behaved.

Leaving the Forbidden City, we drove to the *Summer Palace*, which at 703 acres is larger than the Forbidden City. It was impressive in the artistry of its beautifully designed gardens which included a large lake, created by damming the river

by hand! Waking parallel to a 700 meter pergola (the longest in the world) we finally reached our *Dragon Boat* for a trip across the lake and back to our bus.

On the way to the hotel we drove past the 2008 Olympic village, the *Water Cube* and *Bird’s Nest Stadium*. We ended up back at the Ritz-Carlton. About 5:30, just in time for dinner.

5 October, 2010 (Tuesday): Breakfast was in the Green Fish Room at 05:45; then we boarded our Buss at 07:00. Again the weather was clear and sunny as we left for the *Great Wall*. The trip took about two and a half hours and of course there were crowds- but by now we were used to them. The wall appeared as a giant stone snake clinging to the mountain ridges. Very steep in places- but when crowded is a good place to take a fall, since you’re cushioned by those you fall on.

For whatever reason, Jim was very popular with the Chinese tourists- who wanted to be photographed with him. This happened to all of us but more often with Jim- must be his aura.

On our return to Beijing, we stopped at a jade factory to eat and of course indulge in the obligatory shopping stop. Then it was on to the *Sacred Way* which led to the *Ming Tombs*- a very pretty walk past 600 year old stone animals- some realistic, some fanciful. Dinner was *Peking Duck*, followed by a concert at the Peking Opera. We arrived back at our hotel exhausted.

6 October, 2010 (Wednesday): Up at 04:45, bags out at 06:30, then down to breakfast, followed by tearful goodbye’s to *Nila*, one of Ritz Carlton’s customer helpers. She was a graceful,

beautiful young lady- the kind you would like to take home.

Our bus left the hotel at 08:00 and drove to a very old suburb (a Hutong) to see how the working poor live today. Part of our program was riding in a *pedi-cab* through the neighborhood; then stopping at the home of a fifty-something retired lady who owned a poodle with bright orange colored dyed ears!

We were invited into her home, where she told us about herself and her niece. Individual homes had power and water but no sewer, so each neighborhood had its own restroom building.

After another obligatory shopping stop (for silk carpets this time) we drove to Beijing's *Capitol Airport* for our flight to Xi'an on *China Eastern Airlines* flight MU-2104. Laveta and Carol got in trouble with Security because of the canned chicken salad (small cans) were caught on X-ray. The cans were wisely confiscated by the authorities.

The temperature in the waiting area was stifling. It was a long hour and a half until we boarded. As we taxied the end of the runway for take-off, I watched planes landing. The air was so polluted that I could see planes touch down but as they continued down the runway they disappeared into the smog. Wow- Instrument Flight Rules needed in clear weather!

As we flew south I spotted many terraced hillsides and small villages. In-flight service consisted of just bread and water, but it was good bread... and it was free! As we neared *Xi'an*, a medium size city of about eight million, the dirty brown haze thickened. Air quality was abysmal. Both Laveta and I have lived in the Los Angeles basin and never seen anything like it.

Our drive to the *Tang Dynasty Dinner* and stage show was surreal, like driving through Purgatory. The tops on some buildings were hardly even visible. There were many large 20-30 story, condo's under construction- too many to count. I'd never seen so many construction cranes. As we motored along they appeared out of the grey gloom and as we passed, receded back into it. Cars were dirty from falling particulates. Everything was dirty! Yet there were lots of people around- made me wonder about the lung cancer rate is in this city.

The theater was large and beautiful, the food excellent and the entertainment- simply outstanding!

Immediately after the show, we left for our hotel for a bus ride of about 45 minutes. The *Kempinski*, is located on the outskirts of town and proved to be a large, modern hotel with very large rooms and no staff! It was there that we crashed after a very long day.

7 October, 2010 (Thursday): After a buffet breakfast in the hotel, which was very good- (something were beginning to expect) we headed out to visit the *Terra Cotta Army Museum*. We saw all three "pits", though pit#1 was the first, largest and most impressive. We then went directly from the museum to the Xi'an airport, the smog only a little less oppressive than the day before. Viking arranged lunch for us at the airport.

Charles handed out our boarding passes and we headed to security and our gate. On the way we found an airport drug store and stopped to get some cold medicine for Jim. The druggist took one look at the four of us and offered *Viagra* and *Cialis*.

Sichuan Air Lines flight SU-8806 (an A319) lifted us above the Xi'an's perpetual gloom around 15:30. The flight to *Chongqing* took only about an hour. Deplaning on the tarmac, we were bused to the terminal. Chongqing's airport is large, with that well used look. After verifying our baggage we headed to our riverboat through a seemingly endless metropolitan area of 31 million. New York City seemed small by comparison. The air pollution was a little less than in Xi'an but it was foggy enough that the visual effect was about the same. There was even more construction here than in Xi'an! The city and its construction just went on and on for about an hour. The old and the new, poverty and wealth lie adjacent to one another here. And people, people everywhere going about their lives in the smoggy grayness. It was surreal.

We approached the waterfront about 18:30 just as city lights were turning on. This is the oldest part of town where opulence and poverty rub elbows. Crumbling apartment buildings stood adjacent to new expensive ones, BMW's grudgingly yielded the right of way to hand drawn carts.

The waterfront was old and crumbling. A reception committee of hawkers readied as our bus pulled up. Evading them, we headed down to the water, walking on piers and rusting fuel barges to reach the *Viking Century Sun*. On the dock I bought a bottle of Jack Daniels, (which later proved to be nothing of the sort).

The air smelt of fish, burning coal and diesel.

The *Century Sun* is about five years old, 127 Meters long with five decks, holding 306 passengers and 165 crew. The *Sun* would be our home for the next five days. After dinner, washed down with wine, we bedded down. Sometime later in

the night, the *Century Sun* slipped her moorings and headed down the *Yangtze*.

8 October, 2010 (Friday): Wow- didn't have to do anything in the morning but eat breakfast, lunch and explore the ship (err... boat). Jim developed a sore throat and cold today, so in the afternoon it was just Carol, Laveta and I who took a walking excursion to the *Shibaozhi Pagoda*, and temple- located on an island in the *Yangtze*, connected to shore by a long cable suspension foot bridge. But first we had to hike through the town of Shibaozhi- (population about ten thousand). The town is only ten years old, because the original town was flooded by the river rising behind the *Three Gorges Dam*.

The lower pagoda floor and entrance is protected by a large concrete dam. The temple was made by local farmers, is three hundred years old, nine stories tall and made entirely of wood without the use of nails. It's pegged into the rock wall of the island. You reach the top by climbing ninety-nine wooden steps inside the pagoda.

There are three different temples on the island summit and we saw all of them. Return was by a rock-concrete stairway down the backside of the island- beautiful views and a great excursion.

The Captain's reception was tonight complete with champagne followed by a wonderful meal.

9 October, 2010 (Saturday): We woke up surrounded by rock walls, having entered the Three Gorges area around 07:00. Later we passed the city of *Jingzhou*- perched on hillsides above our port side.

Fog seems always to cling to this river- fog and smog. The river itself is filthy. Many small boats

(paid by the government) go around skimming the flotsam.

Around 0:930 we arrived at the city of *Wushan* perched on the hillside. By China standards it's a small city, though it looked large to me. It too was relocated to escape the rising river behind the dam... all within the last seven years- a seemingly impossible rate of construction.

At 09:30 we boarded a smaller tour boat and proceeded up a tributary into *Qutang Gorge*, the smallest of the three gorges. It was just fantastic. The mountains towered above the narrow river. We also saw the famous hanging coffins. Our round trip lasted about three hours. Lunch was back aboard *Century Sun* around 13:30 as we continued down the *Yangtze* through the main gorge.

Sitting with the Drakes outside on our cabin deck and drinking that counterfeit Jack Daniel's I'd bought a couple of days earlier, I marveled at the scenery and the traffic on the river.

10 October, 2010 (Sunday): Rain! On waking, I discovered that we were stopped- tied up in the town of *Sandoping*, home of the *Three Gorges Dam*. During the night our ship passed through five separate locks, each dropping us 23 Meters! Laveta had a difficult time sleeping because of all the screeching (of the ship slipping on rubber bumpers while being lowered in the locks).

After breakfast Laveta, Carol and I (Jim was still under the weather) went on an excursion to the world's largest hydroelectric plant and dam. The weather was rainy with low clouds- normal for this part of the river, so views were limited. But we saw enough to appreciate its size and scope. We were back aboard in time for lunch. While we were eating, the *Viking Century Sun* cast

off again, continuing downriver into a mountain shrouded, green and misty gorge.

That afternoon Jim visited the ship's doctor and came away with lots of pills (antibiotics, decongestants & cough suppressants). Later we passed through our last lock on the river. Looked like another 20 meter plus drop. The city of *Yi' Chang* appeared on the north shore as a large, modern city- of construction cranes. It took a long time to leave it in our wake. Seattle seems but a small town by the standards of Chinese's cities.

11 October, 2010 (Monday): Slept in again (to 06:30) then went down for breakfast. Today we visited the *Jingzhou Viking Elementary School* (about 800 students, 40 teachers and Supported by Viking River Cruises) is located in the town of *Guanyindang*, and reached by a 40 minute ride through Jingzhou (population about 240,000).

Very dirty, very poor describes this city. It was definitely not the Beijing Financial District. Even so, there was a good deal of construction going on. At the school, the kids put on a show for us, before we visited a classroom and set down with them at their desks. They acted like kids everywhere- except they seemed a little smarter- and none were obese. We had a very good time.

In the afternoon Jim & I went to the observation deck to watch the documentary "*Mao Tz-dong, From Peasant to Chairman*". It was balanced but critical enough that I was surprised it was allowed to be shown.

12 October, 2010 (Tuesday): I woke up just as the *Century Sun* was docking in *Wuhan*. The dockside and riverfront were filthy, though folks were fishing and others swimming- tethered to

their own bright orange floats as they swam across crowded shipping lanes... amazing.

Once aboard our bus Wuhan showed its softer side. It's another medium size city of about eight million. Again there were nice areas and lots of construction cranes. We visited a city park with a small lake and paused to admire their *Pagoda* which our local guide keeps miss-pronouncing as "Pagoder". Anyway, after visiting the *Pagoder* we returned to the bus and set off to see their local History & art museum.

The *Hubei Provincial Museum* is new and an absolutely beautiful piece of architecture. The display we went to see was from the Tomb of *Marquis Ti of Zeng* who lived about 2400 years ago. He was buried with some really beautiful stuff, and since it lay for centuries under the local water table, was remarkably well preserved. There were intricate, very large bronzes that would be difficult to reproduce even today. And the bells- the *Bells of Wuhan* were amazing. There are 64 bells with a total weight is 2500 kilograms! We even attended a concert conducted using replicas. We saw only a fraction of the exhibits but had to be on our way.

After eating lunch in a downtown restaurant serving local specialties we drove about an hour to the Wuhan airport and caught *Shanghai Airlines* FM-9364 to *Pu Dong International Airport* in Shanghai. The flight took only a little over an hour but the plane was hot inside, but then so was the terminal, and so was the Museum. Pu Dong is new and huge- very well laid out. When you have a Gate with a number like C-224, it can be a long walk to baggage claim! It was.

We were bussed through downtown *Shanghai* in the early evening. Wow! We drove by the site

of the world's fair- everything beautifully lit up. But the whole city is gorgeous, especially at night. I've never seen anything like it! We arrived at the *Portman Ritz-Carlton* about 19:00 followed by a great buffet dinner in the hotel.

13 October, 2010 (Wednesday): At 45 stories, the hotel was larger than the *Ritz-Carlton* in Beijing and even more luxurious- though not as personable. We had a marvelous buffet breakfast in one of its restaurants called "Tables" then headed out on our bus tour of old Shanghai and the *Yuyuan Garden*.

The Yuyuan Garden is about five acres, dating back to the *Ming Dynasty* and is very well maintained. There were pavilions, winding paths and grottos. The round doorways and entryways make the Middle Kingdom seem like Hobbit dwellings in J. R.R. Tolkien's *Middle Earth*.

Walking out of the gardens we found ourselves back in old Shanghai- narrow streets and beautiful buildings with lots of shopping. Later, we drove to the Yangtze waterfront and viewed the skyline of modern Shanghai, clearly one of the most modern and stunningly beautiful in the world. Manhattan would be envious of its new construction.

That evening we had our farewell dinner downtown. Sadly it was one of the least interesting meals of the trip. It was followed though, by an acrobatic performance that was really first class and could have sold out in Vegas. Wonderful! We got back to the hotel about 19:30, packed up and went to bed.

13 October, 2010 (Thursday): Bags out at 06:30 then down to breakfast at *Tables*. The restaurant help was *too attentive* as there were about three

people watching us in case we needed anything (my coffee was refilled four times). I'll miss the service though.

We boarded the bus for *Pu Dong airport* at 08:00, the trip taking about an hour- then headed for International Terminal Two. It took about 45 minutes to get our tickets, check our bags and find our way to gate D-75. The girls did some last minute shopping before United Airlines 858 departed for San Francisco at 12:40.

Another long flight of nearly 11 hours took us over the Aleutians Islands again before heading down to San Francisco then on to Seattle and home.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Where to begin? The rate of change in China is so rapid, any comments and observations I make will be out of date within a few years. Even so, I will venture a few.

First: Viking River Cruises did a first rate job. The hotels were five-star, with the superlative service that implies. Charles Wang our tour guide did a great job and never lost any of us, even under the most challenging conditions. The Viking Century Sun was a good boat, large enough for amenities and small enough to be personable - much better than the huge ocean going ships that overwhelm excursion destinations.

Then there's China itself. First of all, it's big and full of people! A strange dichotomy, China; young and old, modern and ancient, rich and poor, past and future, all jumbled together... and all at once.

The people were friendly, especially city folk. As a whole, children seemed loved and well cared

for. And though the countryside might have been different, I detected no preference for boys.

As for the Great Firewall of China- I did surf the web in Beijing and to a lesser extent in Xi'an and Shanghai without *obvious* censorship. Google did default to *google.hk* (Hong Kong) but- it was easy to point to *google.com* in the US. Of course, I wasn't trying to lookup sensitive sites; just find out what was going on in the world from US sites. Additionally, I was permitted (by Chinese routers) to setup a *Virtual Private Network* (VPN) enabling me to breach the Great Firewall- in an encrypted and untraceable way. Once allowed to set it up, I could surf in private. Perhaps this was allowed because I was utilizing routers in five star hotels... or maybe I was just naïve.

Finally- I've never seen so much construction or so many BMW's, Mercedes or Buick's. China is on the move. Their leaders seem to know what they want to do (a novel idea in the western world). Of course they haven't had to invent anything for the last five hundred years- just adopt the science and technology of others. That will certainly change. In much of its long history, China was advanced and self-contained, needing little from others. As a result China became smug and insular. It will be interesting to see if modern China, from a position of strength & prosperity, contributes as much to world civilization as has the West... Time will tell.

In any case, China was a gracious host and we learned a good deal... and had a great time.

C. L. Williamson
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