

China 2011 – Beijing to Shanghai

China Trip – Day 1 – September 29, 2011

Today Marie and Kal Tinka and Marcia and Jim Elving start our 20 day trip through China. Sisters Marie and Marcia (and Kal) have never been to China or mainland Asia. While I (Jim) have been to China a few times on business I have not done much sightseeing in China. We have very much been looking forward to this trip and a chance to experience Oriental culture.

What is unique about China? Chinese civilization stretches back to the 15 century B.C. It is one of the few remaining, and the most significant Communist country. It is the 4th largest (size wise) country in the world, only slightly smaller than the USA. With 1.3 billion people it has the largest population of any country in the world. There are two main languages, Mandarin in the north and Cantonese in the south. Although these two printed languages are the same, the differences in inflection prevent the speakers of each language from understanding the other! The official religion is atheist but some religions are practiced. The terrain in the West is mountains, high plateaus and deserts. In the East are plains, deltas and hills. China has its pollution, flooding and water shortage problems. Due to their “one child policy” and sons being valued more than daughters China has 13 million more boys than girls forcing many men to seek wives from other oriental nations. One of every 3 cigarettes in the world is smoked in China. China has the second largest economy in the world, forecast to pass ours within our lifetimes, but still a fraction of our GDP/person. *Thanks Kal for much of this intro info.*

Due to the size of China and anticipated language and logistic issues we decided that it would be best to go with a guided tour. We have chosen a program offered by Odysseys Unlimited of Boston, their 20 day *China in Depth* tour. This tour company is known for offering excellent itineraries, great accommodations, excellent tour guides and small groups (we will have only 23 folks on our tour). We toured with OU in Northern Italy in the fall of 2009. Our China tour will include several days each in the major cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, the smaller cities of Xian and Guilin, and a four day cruise on the Yangtze River.

The Tinkas depart Dayton Ohio at about 8AM, arriving in Chicago before 9:30AM and then meet up with the Elvings, who fly out of Albany NY at 8:55AM and arrive in Chicago after a two hour flight. Next we board a full 368 passenger United Airlines 747-400 and depart Chicago at 1PM for a 13 hour direct flight to Beijing, China. Kal notes how old this plane is; he spots duct tape holding down the carpet; this is one tired plane, no seat back entertainment systems! On this flight we will cross the International Date Line so we will be arriving in Beijing at 3PM tomorrow (Friday). China time is twelve hours ahead of our time in the Eastern USA time zone. When it's midnight in China it is noon at home. China is in the Northern Hemisphere and just a little further south than the USA. We have chosen this time to go to China as it is their early fall season and also their dry season.....the monsoons are over. We have been checking weather forecasts and it is predicted that we will have excellent weather for at least the first half of our trip with sunny days and highs in the 70s and lows in the 50s.

China Trip – Day 2 – Friday September 30, 2011

Mid way on our 13 hour flight from Chicago to Beijing, China we cross the “International Date Line” and Thursday becomes Friday. We are flying the most direct “Great Circle” route to China which takes us north from Chicago over western Canada, then north of Alaska and then down over western Siberia before we will land at Beijing in north east China. Because we are “chasing the sun” our whole trip is in daylight and we find some of the views out of our airplane windows to be quite unique, especially during the last few hours of our flight.



I am surprised to see that the majority of folks on our 747 (at least in the economy section where we are rather comfortably seated) appear to be ethnic Chinese.....Westerners are definitely a minority. I am not sure if this is normal. The high number of Chinese on our flight *may* be due to the fact that Saturday October 1st is “National Day” in China (this is their largest national holiday, celebrating the date in 1949 when Mao Tse-Tung and the Communists declared victory in the China civil war.....Chang Kai-Shek and his army leaving the mainland for the island of Formosa). This is also the start of a one week business holiday in China and Chinese tourists will be flocking to attractions. So maybe many of our fellow (Chinese) travelers are going home for the holiday week. Also, as no business will be conducted in China next week, there should be few USA business travelers on this flight. It was a “controversial decision” to book this tour to start at the beginning of the China National Holiday (the Tinkas graciously acceded to my wishes, so that I can be home in time to attend my 40th college reunion on October 21) as we know many of the sites we will visit next week will be filled with throngs of Chinese tourists. On the other hand, we have heard that it is an exciting time to visit as the flags will be flying and the floral displays will be outstanding.

Now, our tour operator Odysseys Unlimited sends out a list of tour participants and their home towns a few weeks prior to departure. I, being retired with time on my hands “Googled” everyone’s names to see if we were traveling with anyone famous! To my surprise this also allowed me to determine the ages of our fellow travelers. Our group will consist of 23 people (9 couples and 5 single ladies.....all from the USA and from different states. The ages range from the mid-50s to 81 (Marie and Marcia being the youngest) with most folks in their 60s. At the Chicago airport I recognized two folks who are in our group (from an African vacation picture of them that I saw on the internet), Bonnie and Marshall from Massachusetts and we had fun visiting with them before boarding our flight. On the flight two more ladies traveling together (Sue from IN and Judy from MO who are old college friends and have traveled together, recently, on trips) came over and introduced themselves and we had nice chats.

Our 13 hour flight arrives in Beijing right on time at 3PM and we clear customs and claim our bags at the new airport, which was built for the Beijing Olympics of 2008. We next meet our tour guide, Peter Wong. Initial impressions are that he’s experienced and will be a very good guide. Peter tells us he is a native of Hong Kong. He has also just arrived at the airport as his flight from Hong Kong (where he had just finished guiding the previous Odysseys Unlimited *China in Depth* tour) was delayed a day due to a typhoon.

Peter directs us to a nice motor coach and we start a trip to the center of Beijing, a huge city of 12.4 million people and the capital of China. We learned that the roads, bridges and buildings were really “spiffed up” for the 2008 Olympics but

the roads and mass transit struggle to handle the growing population and rapid increase in the number of automobiles. He points out the many new high rise apartments and office buildings. Peter reinforces that places will be “crowded” for the next week due to the holidays and the great weather but that he’s planned for it!

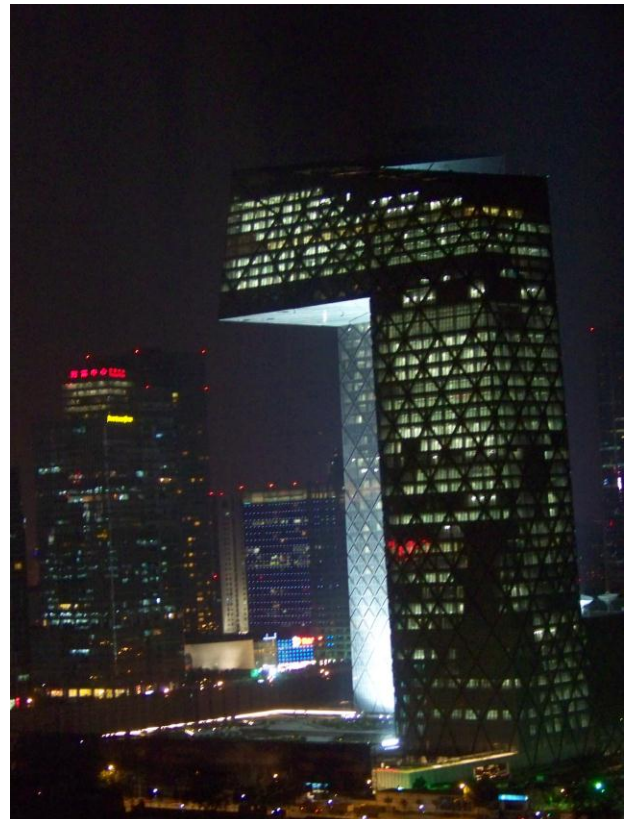


After a little over a one hour drive we arrive at our hotel for the next 4 nights, located in downtown Beijing, the beautiful Sofitel Wanda. Our rooms are excellent. They are large, well appointed, and with a flat screen TV with USA channels. At 6:30PM our group meets and Peter takes us for a walk through the area around our hotel pointing out shopping and eating places. After the walk the Tinkas and Elvings go to Wal-Mart to stock up on some provisions. Later, Marcia and Jim walk to a nearby Subway restaurant and order their favorite sub; the same as made in the USA! Off to bed after being up for about 28 hours. Tomorrow, Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City on National Day!

The view from our room at sunset



A new building built just before Beijing Olympics



China Trip – Day 3 – Saturday October 1st, 2011

Today is the first day of our vacation that we wake up “in China”, meaning that we all had a full night’s sleep on a real bed. We all feel quite well rested and awake, especially after a great shower in one of the Sofitel Wanda’s fancy showers.

After a nice (included) breakfast in the hotel we meet with our Odysseys Unlimited tour guide, Peter Wong, at 8AM for an overview of our tour. Peter, who has been doing these kinds of tours since 1984, does a great job covering safety items, what’s safe to eat and drink, tour etiquette, and tipping recommendations (which are very minimal in China).

Today we will be visiting two of China’s “National Shrines”, the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. These should be interesting excursions as today is China’s biggest National Holiday, “National Day”, celebrating the founding of the Peoples Republic by Mao Tse Tung on October 1, 1949. We expect that the areas we will be visiting today will be packed with Chinese tourists.



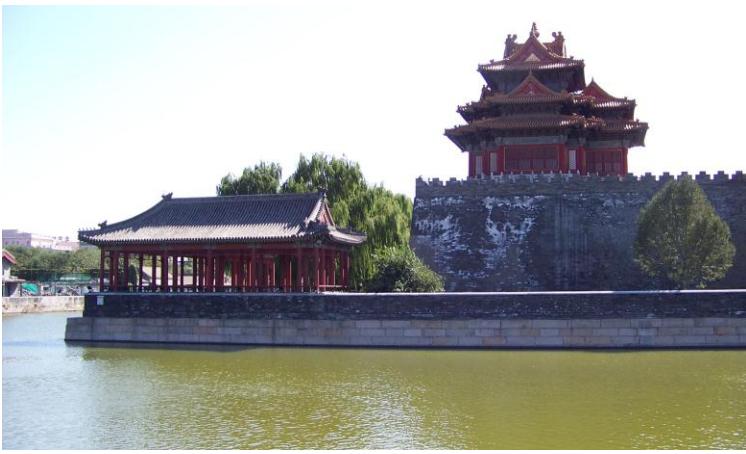
We board our bus at 9AM and the plan is that our local Beijing guide, Vivian, will (as required by the local laws) cover the

commentary on today’s tours, while Peter will “bring up the rear” to insure that none of our 19 travelers strays away from our group at what is anticipated to be extremely crowded venues. Vivian comments on today’s beautiful weather and the clear blue sky. She tells us that there are only about 40 days in Beijing when you can see blue sky due to the haze/smog/pollution (remember the concerns at the 2008 Olympics with the poor air quality that could possibly affect the athletes) Anyway, today turns out to be a perfect weather day; brilliant sunshine and temperatures in the 60s and low 70s. However, soon our coach stops and Peter exits with one of the couples on our tour. They lost their passports when a purse, hung on the back of one of their chairs at a restaurant where they ate (independently) last night, was

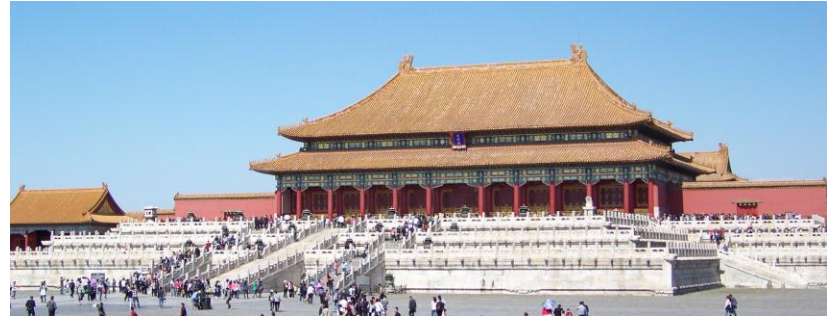


stolen. Peter will now take them to the USA Embassy to attempt to get replacements for their passports. As he also has to meet four missing members of our group (their plane flight from the USA was delayed by one day due to mechanical problems) we do not expect to see him again until dinner tonight.

We travel through extremely heavy traffic for two hours before we finally stop to tour the Forbidden City. Our first stop, Tiananmen Square, was closed due to morning events starring high government officials.....we will have to go there later. All this time our Tour Guide Vivian, a young native Beijing resident who speaks very good English, gives us excellent information of the history of China and the areas we are (slowly) passing through.



At 11AM we exit our coach for a two hour tour of the Forbidden City which is a huge complex of 1000 buildings built by the emperors of the Ming dynasty between 1406 and 1520 AD. This was the home of the 24 emperors that "ruled" China until 1911. The area around The Forbidden City is packed with Chinese tourists (and annoying vendors) but once we get inside of the compound the crowds and the vendors are much fewer and close to tolerable. We have a great tour of this historic and beautiful site with good commentary from Vivian.





Then, it's back to Tiananmen Square, said to be the largest square in the world (100 acres and able to hold 1 million people). We have some time to walk through the huge square, on a beautiful afternoon, and see the floral displays, Mao's Tomb, the monument to the Unknown Soldier from the "anti-Japan" war (which started for China in 1937), the Dr. Sun Yet-San memorial (he formed the republic after the overthrow of the last Emperor in 1911), the National Museum building and the memorial to Mao's Long March in the 1920's. 99%+ of the folks we see today in the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square are native Chinese

and Vivian tells us not to be surprised if some of them stare at us as many, if not most, of the folks that come to these shrines on National Day are not city dwellers but rather travelers from the rural areas, many of whom may have never seen a Westerner!



At 2:45PM we depart for a 45 minute ride to our hotel. Vivian remarks that the many Chinese/English signs that we see (road signs, street signs, billboards) only became quite common in conjunction with the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

We meet at 5:30PM for a short ride to a good restaurant where our group has an (included) "Peking Duck" dinner. This is a typical Chinese restaurant layout with tables of 8 and a "lazy Susan" roundtable that allows all of us to help ourselves to the many appetizers, entrees and a desert. An excellent meal and our Tour Director, Peter, is here with our four delayed tour members (their flight, yesterday, from LA was cancelled due to mechanical problems.....a United Airlines flight.....who would have guessed it)!

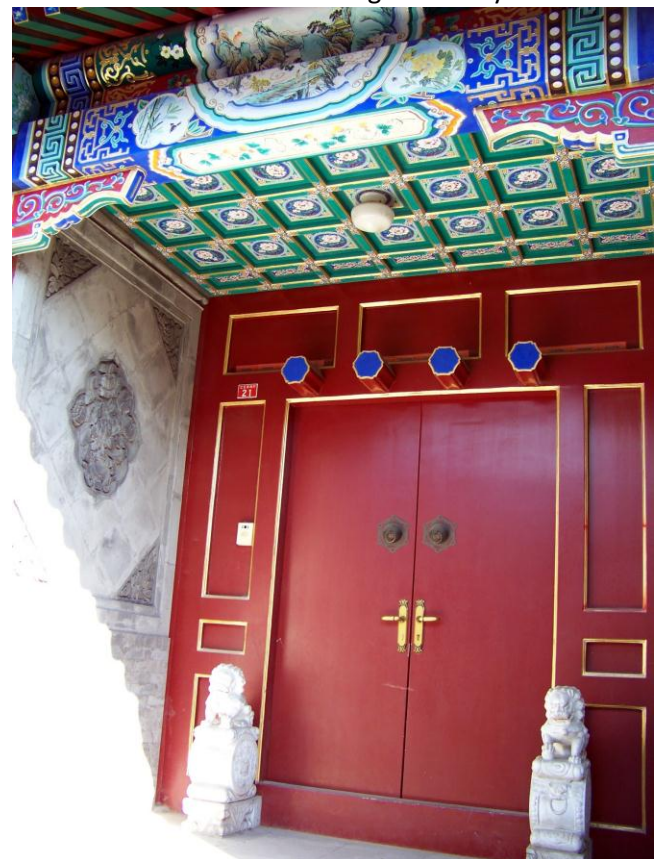


China Trip – Day 4 – Sunday October 2, 2011

We wake up early today after the second night of a four night stay at the “five star” Sofitel Wanda in Beijing. We’ve learned that this hotel is less than two years old. While all of the hotels on this trip are said to be quite nice this one is said to be the best. The weather report for today is again an excellent one; clear skies (a rarity in Beijing) and high temperatures in the low 70s. After our included breakfast buffet (which the hotel charges \$35/person for those not on a package deal) we all meet in the lobby and depart on today’s tour at 8:30AM.

The original tour schedule called for us to go to the Temple of Heaven and the Great Wall today. However four of our group of 23 travelers were late a day arriving in Beijing due to flight issues and another couple lost a day trying to get their stolen passports replaced. So in an effort to insure that these six unlucky folks see everything, Peter Wong our tour guide has rearranged the schedule (and hired an extra tour guide for the day) so they can do everything that we already have done. The Great Wall and Temple of Heaven will now be experienced on day 5 and today we will do what was originally scheduled for Day 5 (as it is more local to Beijing).

We board our motor coach and ride to our first stop, passing seemingly endless rows of new gleaming skyscrapers. This first stop is a tour of a Beijing HuTong. These are the “back alley” residential areas in which most all of Beijing’s residents used to live. Now most of the HuTongs have been torn down and replaced by hi-rise apartments in which, we are told, the younger generation prefers to live. The HuTong area that we are going to, today, has been preserved as a historical site but also still functions as residences.....not as a museum. When we arrive at this HuTong district, which circles a nice man-made lake, we learn that we will be “chauffeured” on our journey in two-person bicycle Rickshaws.....this proves to be most fun as we travel through the alleys and see the one and two story residences which were often homes to multi-generations of the same family.



We next stop for a visit with residents of a home in this HuTong. This family consists of a Grandmother, Daughter and Son-In-Law (who is an artist and also raises racing pigeons) and a granddaughter. The grandmother describes to us the features of her home which has about 2000 square feet of living space and is built around a small court yard. Our local tour guide, Vivian, translates this for



all for us. In past times several families would have occupied this space and shared the courtyard and one communal bathroom and one kitchen.

The owner lets us walk through all of this most fascinating residence.....we enjoy seeing their pets (a dog, cats, fish) and the many pigeons. We leave and next walk through more

interesting alleys. Vivian explains what we are seeing. Of interest is that these residents were, in the past, always heated by coal burning stoves and furnaces. Prior to the 2008 Olympics the government installed electric heat in all of these residences to improve Beijing air quality before the start of the games. The residents do, however, have to pay for the electricity. We next re-board our Rickshaws and return to our motor coach. This has been a most enjoyable and uncrowded, start to our day. Next we stop at "The Beijing #1 Carpet Company" a government run business that makes silk

carpets and wall hangings. We learn how they are woven and then have an opportunity to buy something; a 2' x 3' piece can cost between \$400 and \$4000 and take up to 20 months to weave.....hey, I don't pay that much for a car! This was actually an interesting stop.





Next, we're on to lunch at a typical Beijing restaurant. Many food offerings are delivered to us (at tables of 8 people) on a centrally located lazy Susan. Marcia is finding the food to be quite OK. There is always something among the many food offerings that we find to be quite delicious and it is apparent that our Tour Director, Peter, is taking us to restaurants he knows are "safe" for "western stomachs" and that also serve 1st Class food. This also gives us an opportunity to talk with other tour members. We are most impressed with the friendliness and intelligence of all in our tour group and we find that these folks are all experienced travelers with interesting stories to tell about the many places they have visited.

After lunch we drive by the many venues that the Chinese built for the 2008 Summer Olympics...most impressive.

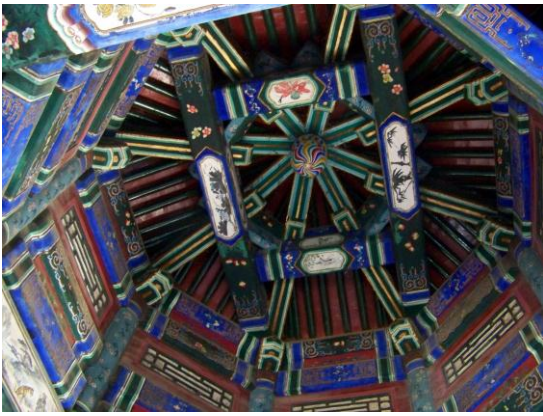


About 1:30PM our coach arrives at the Summer Palace, a vast area of gardens and structures built around a huge man-made lake and used as the summer home for the Emperors between 1644 and 1911. We start with a boat ride across the lake and then tour the gardens and walk by the old structures. Now, this place is huge but packed "wall-to-wall" with Chinese tourists (every once in a while you may see another Anglo). Our guides estimate that there are 120,000 people at the Summer Palace right now, at the height of the vacation week (next week, maybe only 1/3 as many visitors). We have a hard time moving through the huge crowds but our guides do a great job. They explain to us that most of the visitors we see are not Beijing residents, but have come here from their country villages during this national vacation week. They want to see the national shrines (and to see how the Emperors lived).....all that stuff they learned about in school. The most interesting for us is that many of them have apparently never



seen a "live" Westerner. They look at us, laugh and smile and sometimes ask to have their pictures taken with us...little kids wave and say "hello". An amazing experience, as we feel like we are walking through the whole population of China.





Back go our hotel at 4PM. The Tinkas have signed up for an optional “China Opera” excursion, tonight. I’ll give you their review tomorrow!

China Trip – Day 5 – Monday October 3, 2011

Last night, Marie and Kal (and eight others in our tour group) went to the Chinese Opera. Here is Kal’s report:

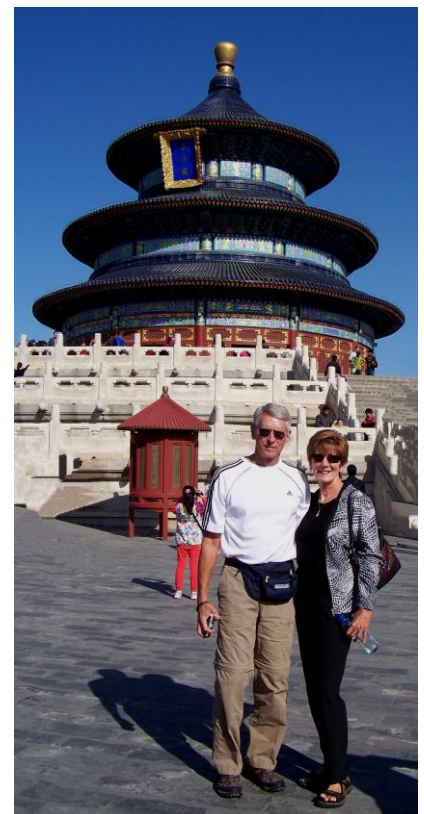


After seeing La Traviata in Dayton a couple of years ago, you could say that Marie and I are not opera fans.

However, our tour book highly recommended attending an opera in Beijing in order to experience China’s rich cultural heritage. It used to be that men played the parts of both the male and female roles. But in recent time, women have been integrated into operas. We found it to be quite enjoyable – wild makeup, wild costumes, exaggerated movements, acrobatics, and unusual live music. The “talking” in falsetto voices was interesting but very curious. Fortunately, subtitles were provided on screens to help you understand what was going on. We would definitely do it again. It is something we have never done before and may never get to do again. Unique and fascinating!



OK...back to today. We wake up early after our third night's sleep in Beijing, China. We feel like we have finally adjusted to the 12 hour time difference from home. We leave our hotel a little after 8AM and drive to the Temple of Heaven.



The Temple of Heaven is a huge park in Beijing. The park was first started in 1420 by an Emperor in the Ming Dynasty. It was used by Emperors as a quasi-religious site for them to appeal for things like good weather. Sometimes animal sacrifices occurred. Today, it is a large public park with many buildings of unique 15th century Chinese architecture. When we first enter the park our guides, Peter and Vivian, take us to an area of the park where Beijing residents come to do their morning exercises; a wide variety of activities including calisthenics, dancing, walking on stones, and games like hacky sack and a weird form of mini-tennis (which I try with a vendor). Next, we go to an area where a number of different board games (mahjong, Chinese checkers, dominos) are being played by the locals. We now spend about an hour viewing the massive "Prayer Hall of the Temple of Heaven" a most impressive structure made primarily of wood and with no nails (wooden pegs were used). We've enjoyed our

time at the park. The crowds were not large and this is another perfect weather day...sunny, brilliant clear skies, high temperatures in the mid-70s.



We drive to the Pearl Market where we learn about fresh water pearls and have an opportunity to buy some. Peter then walks us through a crowded and noisy “farmers market” and explains to us about some of the unique Chinese food items. We walk to a good restaurant for a Chinese lunch.

Shortly after 1PM we depart for the Great Wall of China which is about 40 miles north of Beijing. We’ve learned that construction of the Great Wall began over 2000 years ago and took many centuries to complete. The finished wall stretched over 3000 miles from the Yellow Sea to the Gobi Desert. An estimated 2 million laborers died during its construction. It was built to keep the Mongols from invading Han China but was never really effective in that role. We will be visiting the Mutianyu section which has been “restored” and is said to be the best section to see.

Due to heavy holiday traffic it takes us two hours to arrive and park our motor coach near the wall. We first take a cable car up the mountains to an altitude of 2500 feet. Here, we get to climb along a large section of the wall that winds its way along the ridge of a mountain range. The wall is built from stone and bricks, about 40 feet high and thirty feet wide,

with larger watch towers at strategic locations. The weather we experience as we hike along the top of the wall is perfect; moderate temperatures, clear, and hardly any wind. It is crowded (our tour guide estimates 10 times as many people as normal). Climbing the wall is a most memorable experience and the views of the mountains and valleys are outstanding.



We leave at 5PM for the drive back to our Beijing hotel. This drive normally takes one hour but it takes two hours today due to the heavy holiday traffic. We enjoy an included dinner in the hotel restaurant, a more conventional western style serving rather than the Chinese family style/lazy Susan around a communal table. Our food is excellent. Then we pack our bags and get to bed. This has been a long day, but tomorrow will be longer, as we must be up early to depart the hotel at 6AM for an early morning flight to Xian, in north central China, home of the famous Terra Cotta Soldiers!

China Trip – Day 6 – Tuesday October 4, 2011

We wake up early this morning; a quick breakfast at 5:30AM and depart the Sofitel Wanda hotel at 6AM for the Beijing airport. We really enjoyed our four night stay at the Sofitel. Everything at this hotel was perfect except maybe the bed mattresses were a little hard (which I am told is the norm in China).

At the Beijing airport our tour guide, Peter, quickly guides us through security (including, amazingly, the couple who have lost their passports...and won't receive new ones until we get to Shanghai three days from now...Peter has contacts!). We say goodbye to our local Beijing guide, Vivian. This 28 year old young local lady has done a wonderful job educating us about the sites and culture of the Beijing area, always in excellent English and with humor and a smile.

Our flight on Hianan Airways departs Beijing at 7:50AM for Xian. We are on a new, huge Airbus A340-600. This is a four-engine, wide body jet with 2-4-2 seating in the economy class. We all have seats together in the "4 wide" seating section. Our lack of window seats for sightseeing is somewhat minimized by the seat back entertainment system which includes a camera underneath the aircraft looking down and slightly forward...a view we've not seen before from an aircraft. Our flight lasts just under two hours.

We land in Xian. It is quite foggy and the forecast calls for cooler, cloudy weather all day. Then we should return to the sunny weather we have enjoyed so far in China. Peter leads us to a small tour bus and we meet our local guide for Xian, Ping a local lady in her 40s. We head off on a one hour drive to the city of Xian. The first half of the ride, on a modern freeway, passes through farmland. Ping talks about the area and specifically the life of the farmers. We enter the outskirts of the city and learn that Xian is a large manufacturing center, especially aerospace related work. At one time the capital of ancient China and one of the greatest cities in the world, Xian declined into a bit of a provincial backwater until the accidental discovery in 1974 of the great army of hand carved "Terra Cotta Soldiers" that had been buried for centuries. Xian is now a major tourist attraction and a city of 4 million (including 1 million university students at 40 government



universities and 30 private, but government sanctioned universities). Xian has 70,000 Muslims, descendants from Persian traders.



Our first stop is at the massive city walls, built 600 years ago during the Ming Dynasty; they encircle the old city, 8 miles in total length guarded by a moat. We spend some time, here, walking the walls and the towers (the stone work reminds us of medieval European castles) and adjacent pagodas. The old city consists of mostly four to five story buildings and has an almost European feel. This was a very relaxing stroll.

As in Beijing, the old low lying residential structures in the city are all being torn down and replaced by hi-rise apartments and condominiums. The government pretty much mandates the location, size, and layouts of all of these residences. Ping describes to us hers, which she says is typical...500 to 1000 square feet with a sitting area, living room, kitchen, bedrooms and a western style bathroom. Due to the “one child” rule, all families (like hers) are three people, husband, wife, a child. There are elevators only in residential building higher than 7 stories; most of the new ones are much higher than 7 stories.

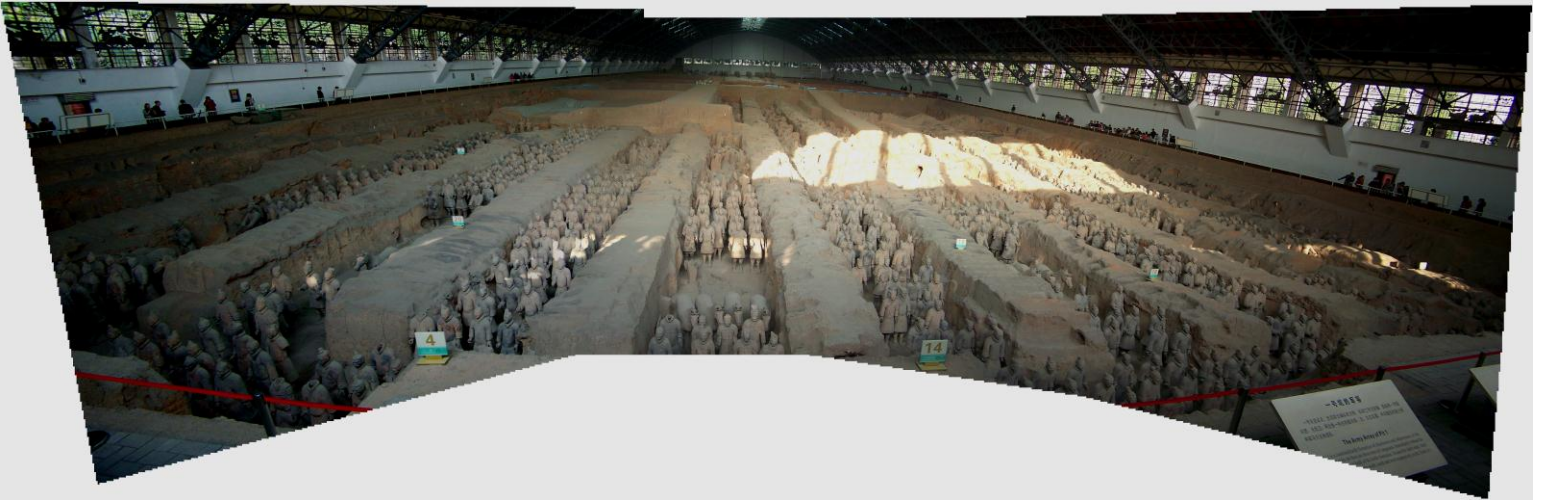


After lunch we headed off to the Shanxi Museum, said to be the second best museum in China. The weather has now cleared up and the sun is out. We spend over two hours at the museum, which features ancient Chinese artifacts...early bronze castings, pottery, and carvings. The rooms in the museum are absolutely

packed; it's kind of warm and very noisy. Fortunately, we have amplified headphones to hear the commentary from our guide, Ping. It was interesting to watch the younger Chinese gather around to listen to her commentary, in English. It is apparent that many younger Chinese are learning English. Frequently, they would ask to have a picture taken with one of us more unique looking Americans (think beard, blond or grey hair). Back to the hotel to rest up. We meet at 6:30PM and go to a Dinner Theater where we enjoy an excellent meal, then a great show combining music from classic Chinese instruments and many dancers, in period costumes, telling the story of the Tang Dynasty. We are back to our hotel by 10:30PM...rather exhausted from a very long day.

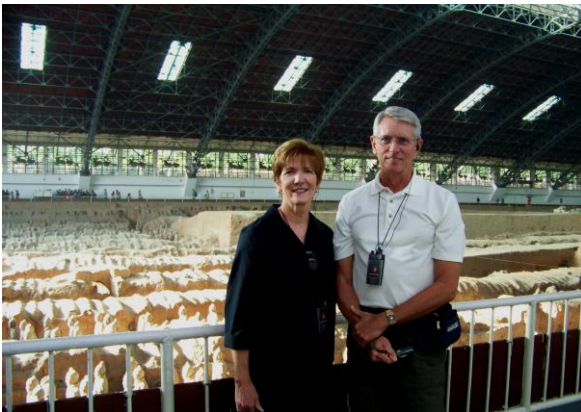


China Trip – Day 7 – Wednesday October 5, 2011



We are up early this morning after our first of two nights at the Sheraton Hotel in Xian, China. Down to breakfast at 6AM. We board our motor coach at 7AM and depart for a 1 hour ride to see the Terra Cotta Soldiers! Now, our Tour Director, Peter, has convinced us (quite easily, actually) to go with this early departure so that we can avoid the huge crowds that fill up all of the tourists sites (with Chinese tourists) during this holiday week. We should arrive at the site just as it is opening and Peter has arranged a special parking space for our motor coach very near the entrance.

The weather has cleared and is predicted to be great for quite a few more days. Today will be sunny (but with some haze from the pollution and farming activities like the burning of corn husks) with highs in the low 70s. Our drive takes us past many industrial plants, some farms, and many hi-rise apartments with many more under construction. Local tour guide, Ping, gives us more information on the historic area we will be visiting this morning, but also the following about youth education in China. *There is such an emphasis on education in China (possibly exacerbated by the fact each couple can only have one child) that, for example, her son goes to school for 8 hours a day, then comes home with 5 hours of homework. When she goes to the school, 90% of the children are wearing glasses due to the eye strain. The kids do not get enough exercise (because all of their emphasis is on studies so that they can get into the best high schools and universities)...they don't look healthy. The government is trying to get schools and parents to reduce the schooling burden on kids and make sure that they get more exercise.*



On our ride we learn from Ping that the Terra Cotta Soldiers were first discovered on 1974 by a farmer digging a well. Eventually it was determined that the site consists of a massive, buried site (of 20 square miles) built to “guard” the tomb of a Ming Dynasty emperor. An estimated 7000 life-sized Terra Cotta figures are believed to exist in the massive, buried vaults. Each figure (mostly soldiers and horses) is slightly less than life-sized. The bodies were “mass produced”, but each head and face is different.



The soldiers once carried weapons but most of the weapons were plundered years ago. We visit the three restored tombs, Pits 1, 2, and 3 (the first one was opened in 1979). These “tombs” have been unearthed and now are enclosed by permanent, climate controlled buildings. All of the Terra Cotta Warriors were broken, and have painstakingly been pieced back together and 1000 of them have been placed in their historical positions. We learn that they were originally all painted in bright, correct colors, but the technique they used causes the vivid colors to fade within 10 minutes of being exposed to air. Each warrior weighs about 400 pounds (solid legs for stability, hollow bodies). This museum is very well done and our headsets do a great job of picking up Ping’s good commentary. This is a most memorable experience.



By now, the Chinese tourists have arrived. Some that have not seen many Anglos have their friends take their pictures with us to show to their other friends when they return to their rural homes. We watch a twenty minute movie, have some time for shopping, and then return to Xian for a special “Dumpling Lunch” at a restaurant, where we are served, on the lazy Susans at our group table. After appetizers, we are served 15 different types of steamed dumplings. Delicious.



After lunch we walk to a local park and view the seven story high, 1400 year old Little Wild Goose Pagoda. We enjoy the park and a chance to walk through artists galleries. Next, on to a Jade Market to learn about the stone and then browse. We are told that the Chinese government requires the local guides to take all tourists to at least one government owned “Factory Store or Market” in each city. Odysseys Unlimited tries to insure that the ones we go to are top notch. Traffic is bad in the city of Xian. While Beijing’s roads have been built up prior to the 2008 Olympics, and Shanghai’s prior to the 2010 World Expo, this city’s roads are not plentiful enough to handle the rapidly expanding traffic. We see a wide variety of living conditions and the tremendous construction activity...most of it being more hi-rise apartments. Our last stop is for a walk through a new “luxury” area in Xian, with fancy stores, outdoor sculptures, and parks. The nearby residential area, built around a manmade lake, features luxury condos and homes for the wealthy; not everyone has to live in a 500 square foot apartment!

We have a nice (included) buffet dinner, tonight, at our hotel.

China Trip – Day 8 – Thursday October 6, 2011

Today we will leave Xian, China after a two night stay at the Sheraton Hotel. The Sheraton was the first “luxury” hotel opened in Xian (1982), shortly after the opening of the Terra Cotta Soldiers display in 1979. The hotel has a nice lobby and excellent restaurant. The rooms, although recently updated, do seem a little dated when compared to our very new hotel in Beijing. We were very comfortable and enjoyed watching a playoff USA baseball game live each morning on ESPN. Our hotel room TVs also received English speaking channels like BBC, CNN, and CNBC, only available in China to guests staying in the hotels that cater to Westerners.

We board our motor coach at 9AM for a one hour ride to a farming community. Our local guide, Ping, explains to us that the farmers in this region grow two main crops, corn and winter wheat. They also grow some fruit, like Kiwi. The type of corn that is grown is not for human consumption but is for animal feed and processing into food and chemical products. China imports sweet corn from the USA for eating! This is another great weather day.....sunny with hi temps in the low 70s, although the skies are a little hazy, which I presume is from pollution.



We arrive at the rural farming village of Nan Suo, a village of 750 people covering, with fields, about 200 acres. It is harvest time for the corn and we see corn kernels and corn on the cob out in the sun drying along with the husks (which will later be used for fuel). We are met by a leading farmer, “John” who is also an artist. He leads us to the courtyard of his house, where we are surprised to find several men playing musical instruments and women singing a welcome song for us. Other residents, many holding small babies, and children watch from a distance. Next, the women perform the “Dragon Dance” and then give the “Dragon” to seven of us, as the music plays and we attempt the Dragon Dance. Last, the women perform a dance to another musical tune.

John next shows to us and describes the old farming implements that he has on display at one end of his courtyard and then leads us into a room of his house which he has kept as a monument/museum replicating a farmer’s house of forty years ago, complete with a large poster of Mao Tse-Tung on the wall. Ping interprets as he describes the features of the old layout. We next walk into the rooms of his modern house and then upstairs to a large room displaying hundreds of his paintings.





We sit down and John tells us about the history of the village of Nan Suo, the changes over the past forty years, and his career as a farmer and as a painter (he learned from the scholars and teachers that were exiled by Mao to the farms during the Cultural Revolution). We also learn about his visit in 2009 to display his art in Minnesota. John then paints a watercolor for us, showing us his technique. Several of us buy one of his painting, which he signs and stamps for us. We meet his son-in-law and his grandson and granddaughter. We learn that in the rural areas couples can have a second child if it's approved by the authorities and there is a four year gap in the child's ages. John next leads us towards the fields and describes their farming process. Each farmer has a designated plot of land (the days on the commune and communal farming are long over). They recently had a month of rain, so the corn fields are too wet to allow mechanized equipment. Corn is being picked by hand.



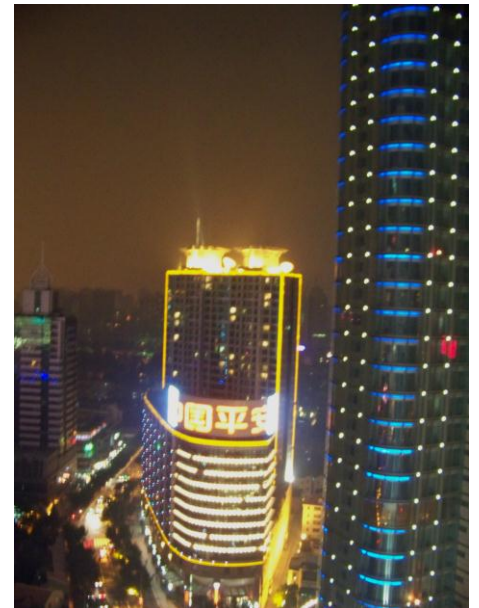
He has us visit a small Buddhist Temple that was revived after the Cultural Revolution. We re-board our motor coach and depart Nan Suo at 11:30AM. What I had thought would just be a "time filler" has, instead, been a very moving experience...one that I will never forget.



We arrive at the Xian airport at 12:30PM for our 2PM flight to Shanghai. Our Tour Director somehow makes this the most pleasant experience I've ever had departing from a Chinese airport. Our checked bags were picked up at our hotel rooms this morning and are being sent to Shanghai without us ever having to touch them (or check them in at the Xian airport). At the airport we are directed to a private restaurant where we are served (an included) lunch while Ping and Peter go and check us all in and get our boarding passes. We say goodbye to Ping, our local Xian guide, who has been excellent. Thirty five minutes before our flight Peter leads us from the restaurant and through security and to the gate where we board our China Eastern Airbus A320 for a 1-1/2 hour flight to Shanghai.

Unfortunately, we sit on the ground for two hours due to "Traffic Control" so we arrive in Shanghai two hours late at about 6PM. Later, Peter tells us that as there could have been no weather reason for the delay, the hold was most probably due to a high government official taking off or landing in Shanghai...when that happens they stop all of the flights with us "small potatoes".

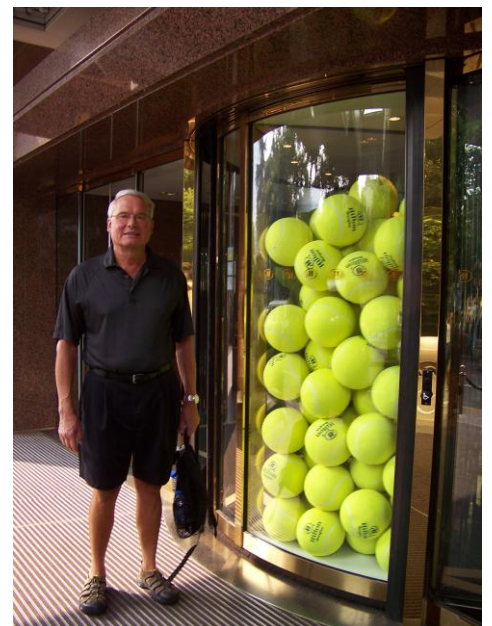
Our Tour Director, Peter Wong, quickly leads us to retrieve our checked luggage (which we deposit for a van to deliver to our rooms at our Shanghai hotel) and we meet our Local Guide for Shanghai, a young man and a lifetime resident of Shanghai, Joshua. He leads us to our motor coach and we head off for a one hour drive to our hotel in downtown Shanghai. Joshua starts filling us in on the history of Shanghai, which is one of the largest cities in the world (and the largest in China with a population of 22 million people.....the same population as the country of Australia). The city covers 220 square miles. The Chinese government has designated Shanghai to be their trading and banking center, hoping to build it into one of the world's top financial hubs...and they have invested in that goal. The roads and infrastructure are in great shape. Since 1990, 5000 hi-rise building have been built, including the second highest building in the world. We drive into downtown Shanghai, marveling at the new buildings and the brilliant night time lighting.



We arrive at our hotel, The Shanghai Hilton (where we will be staying for three nights), at 7PM and walk right to our rooms, as Peter has had our local guide check us all in earlier (and Peter has faxed to him the required copies of our passports) and has handed our room keys to us on the bus! Boy...they know how to make traveling easy! The Shanghai Hilton is a new, "fancy" hotel like the great one we had in Beijing. It's 38 stories high and in the best part of Shanghai, near the famous Bund district. We all have rooms on the 27th floor with great views. After a few minutes to freshen up in our rooms, we meet in a private dining room where we are served an excellent (included) dinner. Tomorrow we start our exploration of Shanghai!

China Trip – Day 9 – Friday October 7, 2011

We wake up after a good sleep at the Shanghai, China Hilton...the first of a three night stay. The Shanghai Open tennis tournament, an ATP Masters men's event, starts tomorrow and our hotel is the host hotel. I noticed a couple of players checking in, last night, and they have a "players help" desk (I stopped by and told them I was available if they were short a player for the tournament) and a "media desk" set up in the lobby and regular shuttles running to the stadium.



After breakfast, we meet our group in the lobby at 9AM to start some sightseeing. This is the last day of the “Golden Week” celebration of the 1949 revolution, so crowds should be less at the “tourist’s spots” in China after today.

We continue to enjoy all of the fellow travelers in our tour group, which totals 23 folks. They are all pleasant, intelligent, and fun to be with. Our Tour Director, Peter, and the local tours guides have all been outstanding.

Our first stop is the “Old Town” area of Shanghai, also known as “Chinatown”. This was the area of Shanghai where the native Chinese lived in the first part of the 1900s. Shanghai was relatively “small” at that time, not the city of 22 million that it is today. The other areas of the city were known as “Concessions”, ceded to the Western powers (and Japan) after disputes in the 1800s; i.e., the “French Concession” area and the “German Concession” area. In these concessions, the foreigners lived, ruled, and managed their trading channels. They supplied electricity to their area, ran schools, provided security and set the laws. This blend of Eastern and Western gives Shanghai a unique mix of architecture. Our hotel is actually located in the old French Concession.



Today is another perfect weather day (clear skies except for a bit of a haze, and hi temps in the mid-70s). We spend a couple of hours walking through the Old Town area. The highlight is Yu Yuan Gardens, which was the private residential compound of a rich Chinese citizen built 450 years ago during the Ming Dynasty. This area features rock formations, ponds, flowers, foliage, and foot bridges running between several structures. Each structure, which exhibits the Ming architectural style, has examples of period furniture inside. A very relaxing place; crowds are not bad and good commentary from our local guide, Joshua. We have 45 minutes of shopping time outside of the compound before we drive to an area of the French Concession, Xintiandi. His area has a lot of the original building, now mostly housing restaurants.

We stop and see the building where the “first Communist Cell” in China was formed, by 30 Chinese, in 1921 (Mao Tse-Tung being one of the 30).

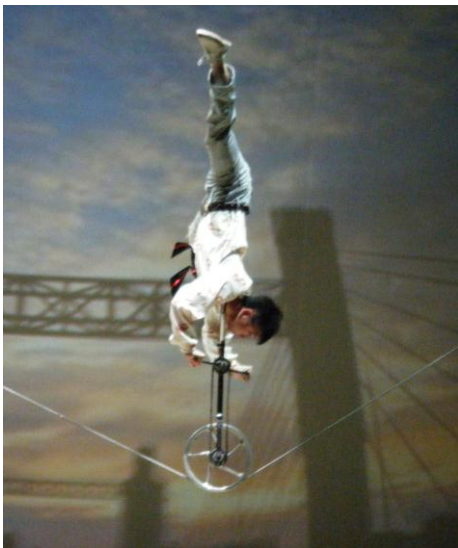
Our group stops for lunch at a nice Chinese restaurant and we have our first taste of Shanghai cuisine. We are happy to see that we are joined by Sandra and Greg from Washington, the unfortunate couple who had a purse stolen on their first night in China, losing their passports. After much time with the “officials” in Beijing, then back and forth between the US Embassy and China officials this morning in Shanghai, they should have new passports and China visas tomorrow.



After lunch, the motor coach stops at our hotel to drop off those that do not want to go to the “Silk Factory” and learn how silk is produced and then have a chance to buy silk goods. Marie, Kal, Marcia and I opt to get off at our hotel. Dinner is on our own, tonight, prior to our group going to a show. Kal and I spend a couple of hours walking around the areas near our hotel scoping out a restaurant for dinner.

At 5:15PM the four of us walk from our hotel, through a small park and on clean, wide sidewalks for about half an hour to reach our dinner spot. Now, we have to be extremely careful crossing streets. Even when we have the green light and crossing signal we’re in peril. Drivers, motorcyclists, and bicycles ignore pedestrians and run red lights. In the course of our time on the vacation, we will come upon about five accidents, driving by in our motor coach. Most of them are between a car/truck and a motor cyclist, with the cyclist obviously badly injured. We safely make it to our chosen restaurant, and the four of us enjoy an excellent pizza dinner on the outdoor patio of the only pizza place we could find in our area of Shanghai. We dine as the sunsets, which changes the colors of the huge, glass covered skyscrapers that circle us.

Just after 7 PM we depart the restaurant and take a short walk to join our group for a show, and it’s a great one. We see the “Shanghai Acrobatic Show”, an amazing exhibition of tumbling, acrobatics, balancing, juggling, and slight-of-hand. Our group is seated in a prime area, and we very much enjoy the 1-1/2 hour show. On the way back to the hotel we learn from our tour guide that the average age of the performers is 22 years. They have trained and had their schooling, since the age of 8, at the Shanghai Acrobatics Institute. When the young children apply for admittance to the Institute, they must be accompanied by both parents, so that the officials can make sure that neither parent is tall...short children/people make the most agile acrobats!



China Trip – Day 10 - Saturday October 8, 2011

Today is our second full day in Shanghai. We are staying at the Shanghai Hilton, which is one fine hotel. The rooms are great, and the view from our rooms up on the 27th floor is excellent...day or night.



We board our motor coach at 9AM and drive to the “Bund” district. This is the area of Shanghai, located right on the Huangpu River (which empties into the Yangtze River and then the China Sea...only a few miles away), that was the “English Concession” controlled by Great Britain (and a portion to the north by the United States) from the mid-1800s until 1940. This area housed the major Western financial institutions and their circa 1920’s style buildings line the main road facing the river. These buildings and the businesses were, of course, confiscated by the new Communist government in 1949 and the area was neglected and closed to tourism until the 1990’s when Shanghai started to promote the area as a tourist site (come and see the “colonial relics”*the buildings, not us and our tour group!*). We enjoy our stroll along the river, the interior of the beautiful HSBC building (originally the Hong Kong and Shanghai British Commercial Bank.....now housing a government bank, the Pudong Development Bank), and the views of the skyscrapers across the river in the Pudong district, which was farmland until the 1990’s. The tall buildings in Shanghai,



architecturally, are in my opinion the most diverse and beautiful in the world. We are told that all of these skyscrapers are financed by private money, but must get approval from the government “Design Board” before construction starts...to make sure they each have a unique appearance...no “cookie cutter” buildings, here. Peter says it’s an “architect’s competition” each time a new hi-rise is proposed, to see who can get the winning design. We are having yet another perfect weather day.....sunny skies and temperatures in the mid-70s. There is a haze in the sky which our Tour Guide, Joshua, admits is pollution...he says it goes away when it rains!

There are hardly any “crowds” today; the National Holiday week is over! We’ve read that 25 million Chinese tourist flocked to the historic sites over the past week...we believe we met most all of them! Apparently, the majority of Chinese do not get a paid vacation, so they must vacation and travel during one of the two “Golden Weeks” which the government has declared as official holiday weeks.



We now drive to the Shanghai Museum which is China’s National Museum of antiquities and is acknowledged as their “best” museum. We are given “audio guides” to explain what we are looking at and then spend the next hour and a half touring the museum.

Great displays of ancient Chinese coins, jade, furniture, ceramics, bronzes, paintings, calligraphy, and sculptures. The museum is featuring a traveling exhibition from New Zealand on the Maori people. We enjoy this modern museum. Crowds are quite manageable.



Next we go on a driving tour of some areas of central Shanghai that we have not yet seen. We drop some of our tour group off at Nanjing Road, Shanghai’s main shopping area, and at the “Jewish Ghetto”. We’ve learned that in the 1930’s 20,000 Jews, mostly from Austria, relocated to Shanghai (few other countries would accept them) as Nazism spread through German speaking Europe. Vidal Sasson, a Shanghai resident, helped them settle and they flourished.



When the Japanese took Shanghai in 1940, they moved the Jews out of their homes and into the “Ghetto”. We are driven back to our hotel in early afternoon for some free time.

This afternoon the four of us exit our hotel and walk in a direction we have not explored. Shanghai is a very clean and modern city and we feel very safe walking around. After a while we find a “British Pub” located on a busy corner and go in, enjoying a pint while we watch, with the Anglo ex-pats, the Rugby World Cup match live from New Zealand between Ireland and Wales (we also watch chaotic traffic negotiate the intersection).

Dinner is on our own, tonight, and the four of us walk back towards the theater area and have a good dinner at a restaurant specializing in hamburgers! We catch a taxi and go back to the Bund district and spend 45 minutes walking around and looking at the beautiful city lights.

Tomorrow we will fly from Shanghai to the small city of Yichang in central China. There, we will board a small ship for a four day cruise up the Yangtze River.

