

## China Trip – Day 11 – Sunday October 9, 2011

Up this morning after our third and last night at the excellent Shanghai Hilton. We spend the morning packing our suitcases, checking out the professional tennis players leaving our hotel for the ATP Masters Tournament, walking in the district around the Hilton, and watching, live, the first game of the American League baseball Championship Series (China time is exactly 12 hours ahead of the East Coast of the USA). Interestingly the only public picture of Mao Tse-Tung that I've seen was the large one near his tomb in Tiananmen Square. However we see his face often as it's on all of the Chinese paper currency.



Today is another perfect weather day; highs in the upper 70s and sunny. The “haze” that hangs over Shanghai has been progressively clearing over the past couple of days and we are getting very clear views of the many skyscrapers this morning.

We board our motor coach at 12:30PM for the trip to Shanghai's Pudong Airport. We stop and a few of the couples on our tour exit our coach and take the high speed magnetic levitation train out to the airport. This train, built by a German firm, can hit speeds well in excess of 300 mph. It's not running that fast today as China has slowed the speeds of all of their high speed trains after a recent series of accidents. We motor coach riders actually beat the train riders to our meeting point at the airport.

At 3:40PM we board our Shanghai Airlines Boeing 737 for the two hour flight to Yichang. Arriving in Yichang, we collect our bags and board a motor coach for a 45 minute drive into the “small city” of Yichang...1.4 million people in just the city, 6 million people combined in the city and immediate area around the city. Yichang is not a modern fancy city like Beijing or Shanghai with their endless skyscrapers. It's situated right on the Yangtze River and is the starting and ending place for many river cruises. It has been designated as a manufacturing center due to its proximity to the

hydroelectric power from the Three Gorges Dam. We pass several large factories and see many more under construction. We stop for dinner at a good (spicy!) Chinese restaurant, and then proceed to a dock on the Yangtze River to board our ship for our four day/night trip up the river.

Our ship is the Katarina, operated by Victoria Cruise Lines and is said to be one of the best plying the river. The ship was built in 2004 and refurbished in 2010. It's 330 feet long, 50 feet wide, and has 6 decks. There are 98 Standard Cabins and 32 Executive Suites for a capacity of 260 passengers (and we learn we will have a full complement of passengers). There are also 128 crew members. Although we had read that this cruise line is owned by Chinese-Americans, and caters to Western tourists it's apparent that the vast majority of our fellow passengers are Chinese. Now our Tour Director Peter Wong has told us that we would be having all of our meals in the smaller “Executive Dining Room” and have access to

the associated lounge (with free “Happy Hour”) and a private observation deck at the rear of the ship but we had all assumed we would have standard cabins. Imagine our delight when the ship's Cruise Director addressed our tour group and told us that, as the ship was at capacity, we had all been assigned Executive Suites (and don't tell the other passengers that we got the upgrade “for free”)!

We now go to our cabins (suites!) and they are great. Nice bathroom with a shower/tub combo, 10' x 20' living area with desk, couch, refrigerator, closets, table and chair and flat



screen TV (with HBO, CNN, and several other stations), 10' x 12' bedroom with another flat screen TV, and a nice balcony with a couple of chairs. The Tinkas and the Elvings have adjoining cabins, and we think we are going to like this cruise!

Tomorrow we will set sail in the morning and will go through the first gorge and then disembark and visit the massive Three Gorges Dam in the early afternoon before entering the first of five locks that will take us up to the level of the water behind the dam. We will rise from 240 feet above sea level to 600 feet above sea level.

### **China Trip – Day 12 – Monday October 10, 2011**

I wake up after a great night's sleep in our suite on the Victoria Katarina. Today we will start our four day journey up the Yangtze River, from Yichang to Chongqing, a distance of 410 miles. We will anchor at night and mostly travel during the daylight hours.

At 6:30AM I go up to the Executive Lounge/Restaurant at the rear of the top deck (deck 6) and am offered coffee while the staff quickly configures our netbook computer to receive their WiFi internet feed. There are also two computers hooked up for those in our group to use for free. At 7:30AM buffet breakfast is served in the Executive Restaurant and it is now apparent that our group of 23 and seven other folks (most are from Australia) are all that will have access to these facilities (and the observation deck outside of the restaurant). The other 230 passengers, primarily Chinese, are required to use the main lounge and restaurant. I start to feel like the "Ugly American" as Chinese folks come up the stairs to our lounge to investigate and are denied entry!



At 8:30 there's a lecture offering background on our cruise, for English speakers, in the main lounge. We learn that the Yangtze is the third longest river in the world (after the Nile and the Amazon), stretching 3900 miles from the mountains of Tibet to the Pacific Ocean at Shanghai. We also learn about the three main gorges that we'll be passing through on our trip, the massive Three Gorges Dam, and the aquatic wildlife threatened by the building of the dam; the sturgeon which can grow to 4 yards in length (whose spawning has been restricted by the dam) and the Binji Dolphin, Finless Porpoise and Yangtze Alligator who are all considered a food delicacy and have nearly been hunted to extinction.

At 9:30AM our ship gets underway and we travel through the 10 mile long Xiling Gorge. Beautiful views of the surrounding mountains from our wind protected observation area at the rear of the top deck. Today's weather is partial sun and warm; highs will be near 80. However it is very misty and hazy which we are told is normal. It is most interesting viewing the towns and villages along the river. There's a lot of river traffic; barges, container ships, fishing boats, ferries, and cruise ships like ours.



After lunch we meet, disembark, and at 12:15 PM and take a motor coach to the Three Gorges Dam. This controversial engineering project was completed in 2008 with the objectives of flood control, improved navigation, irrigation, and hydraulic power generation. The Chinese are very proud of this accomplishment but the resulting lake that formed behind the dam required the relocation of 1.2 million people. Many say the beauty of the gorges was diminished (as the walls are no longer as high), aquatic species are threatened, and that silting will eventually impede navigation.

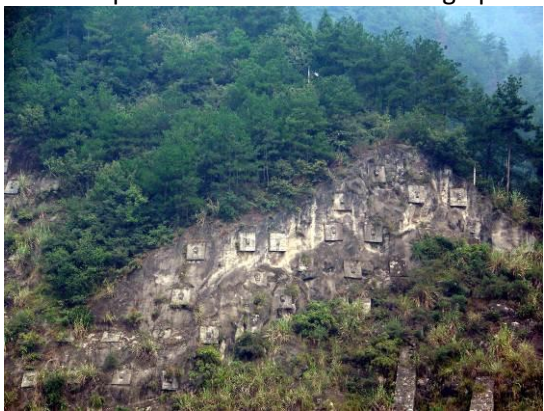


In any event it is an amazing sight. The dam is 1.4 miles in width and 600 feet high. There are 32 power generators of 700 megawatts each. We also see the five-stage double-width ship locks that raise boats 600 feet. Each of the five locks is 300 yards long and 32 yards wide and can take 4 or 5 large ships at a time. It takes four hours in total to transit the locks. Also under construction is a first-of-its-kind "ship elevator" which will have the capability of lifting ships (in a huge tub of water) up and over the dam in 30 minutes. The completion of the project has been delayed until 2015 as they can't find cables strong enough for the required lifting. They are now working on a solution using gears and chains.

We return to our ship after an interesting tour of the Three Gorges Dam and walk past a large numbers of not-too-aggressive vendors. At 3PM we are back underway and soon reach the first of the five locks. We wait for other ships to join us and enter the first lock at 4:15PM. It does take us until 8PM to finally clear the last of the locks, when we are just finishing up a great dinner.

### **China Trip – Day 13 – Tuesday October 11, 2011**

Our ship Katarina continues cruising up the Yangtze River until



midnight when it docks for the night, our second of four nights onboard. At 6:15AM our ship resumes its trip up the river and soon enters the 25 mile Wu



Gorge, considered the most beautiful part of the Yangtze. Forest covered mountains flank both sides of the river and we get a good view of the spectacular Goddess Peak. Shortly before 7:45AM we exit the gorge, which is perfect timing as breakfast is served at 7:45AM (I think this ship and Captain may have done this cruise before). The weather is cloudy but warm.

Now, the food on this short cruise has been excellent and we are enjoying the great service in our “private dining room”. Our tour group sits at three round tables of eight, each having excellent views out of the picture windows. Breakfast and lunch are served buffet style, while dinner is served ala-carte, with choices of appetizers, soup and salad, entre & desert.



At 8:30AM we dock at Wushan. This town of 180,000 was built in 2003 to replace the 3000 year old town “Old Wushan” and absorb the residents displaced by the reservoir created by the Three Gorges Dam. We board a small two deck ship and start a four hour journey of the Daning River a tributary of the Yangtze. Our local guide tells us that the area in front of



Wushan, now a slow moving, wide river 300 feet deep, use to be a fast flowing stream 6 feet deep and famous for white water rafting. We travel for 1-1/2 hours up the Daning River through a spectacular area known as the “Small Three Gorges”. We see the ancient “hanging coffins”, 2000 year old petrified wooden coffins from the time when the Ba people populated the region, secured to the side of cliffs. Also, we spot rhesus monkeys. We next board a small motorized “sampan” and continue for another half hour up a shallower part of the river. Back to our two-decker and then down the Daning River back to the Katrina, passing terraced fields growing spices and fruits and fish farms. We really enjoy this side trip from our larger ship.

We’re back on our ship at 1PM. Now it has started lightly raining (this is our first rain on this vacation) as we enter the last of the Three Gorges, the five mile long Qutang Gorge. The rain and the increasing fog/mist limits our views. We spend the rest of the afternoon surfing the internet, reading, attending lectures, shopping in the ships shops and just relaxing.

After Happy Hour and dinner there’s a show in the main lounge.

## China Trip – Day 14 – Wednesday October 12, 2011

We wake up after the third of our four nights on the Katarina, cruising up the Yangtze River in Central China. The crew of this ship is all Chinese except for the Cruise Director who was born in Hamburg



Germany but now lives in a suburb east of Chongqing. The crew that we interact with, the restaurant, entertainment and cleaning staff are mostly young but uniformly cheerful, polite and responsive.



We are docked at Shi Bao Zhai and after breakfast nearly all of our fellow Chinese travelers (perhaps 200) and the Japanese (maybe 25 in total) depart the ship for an optional tour of a nearby Chinese Shrine. Our Tour Director, Peter, has recommended to us that we not go on this excursion. We all stay on board and spend most of the morning chatting with the fellow members of our tour group, whom we continue to find most fun and enlightening to

converse with. We notice some of the residents of Shi Bao Zhai on the shoreline washing clothes in the muddy Yangtze. Knowing that Kal and Marie sent some laundry out this morning for the ship to process, I tell them that I can see some of our ship's laundry bags lying next to the folks "laundering" in the river; the ship must have "farmed out their laundry"! Mid-morning our ship continues up the Yangtze. We are out of the Gorge area but enjoy watching the other ships pass by as well as the activities, scenery and towns on the shore line. The persistent haze continues but with no rain and temperatures in the mid 70's.



At 2:30PM we depart our ship for the afternoon excursion to Fengdu. Known as



the "Ghost City", Fengdu is a collection of Buddhist and Taoist temples set on top of a hill known as Ming Mountain. We reach the temples after a short cart ride, a walk up a sloping ramp, and an invigorating climb of 255 steps (the chair lift was recently dismantled and the new escalators are not yet in service). The many "goofy looking" Buddhas populating the temples seem to make this a cross between a museum and Disneyland. Our

excellent local guide and our Tour Director, Peter tell us about the legends around each Buddha; most having to do with the afterlife and heaven and hell. There are three “Choices” we get to participate in:

- 1) Couples cross a bridge hand-in-hand. They must do it in exactly nine steps, or they will not be together in the afterlife. Then, we chose between two more bridges; one promising longevity or one offering more money. We chose the longevity, figuring we have enough money (unless we live too long)!
- 2) We must cross over a high threshold without touching it with our feet. If you touch it, it means bad luck and a change in your gender!
- 3) You must balance on one foot on a small, round stone for three seconds or you will wait in limbo many years before reaching heaven.

During our trip we got laughs from reading the “English” translations on many of the signs; probably translated from a Chinese-English dictionary!



We return to the Katarina, and soon it’s time for happy hour and then the “Captain’s Dinner”. During happy hour our Cruise Director, Chris, projects for us his pictures of different areas of the river valley before and after the dam was built. Our meal is excellent. The Captain is seated in the main dining room with the other 200+ travelers, but he pays a visit to us, during our dinner in the Executive Dining Room. He addresses us through an interpreter, thanking us for traveling to his country and traveling on the Yangtze River. He gives us each a commemorative key ring.

Off to bed; our river trip ends early tomorrow morning. Our ship will continue traveling up the Yangtze tonight, docking at 2AM tomorrow at the largest city in the world, Chongqing.

### **China Trip – Day 15 – Thursday October 13, 2011**

Today we finish our four day cruise on the Yangtze River. Our bags are packed and outside our doors at 7AM, then breakfast and we exit the ship at 8AM. Odysseys Unlimited pays all the tips for us on this tour (for porters, waiters, and local tour guides) except for the tip for Peter, our Tour Director. However, they do ask that we give small tips to the room maids, wait staff, and local guides for the cruise portion of the trip. Peter carefully instructs us on how much to tip these crew members so that we don’t “tip too much” and ruin it for his next group. We’ve come to know the tip recipients by the first names (Chinese receive a “western name” in grade school) shown on their badges; Lydia, Coco, Bobo, Cathy, Ali, and Vivian. We really enjoy our time on the Katarina. The private Executive Lounge, Dining Room, and back deck viewing area that Odysseys Unlimited arranged for us was great and made this a most restful voyage. Our “lucky” upgrade to Suites for our cabins was a real plus. Most of the shore excursions were good and the scenery was great. Food was excellent. The weather could have been a little clearer, but I guess it’s normally quite hazy on the Yangtze. There was a bit of a smoky smell (cigarettes or engine exhaust) that seemed to permeate the interior spaces (even though there was to be no smoking inside of the ship) that bothered some.

At 8AM we board a motor coach, as always quite roomy for our group of 23, and our local tour guide starts to give us information about the city we are in. It is claimed to be “the largest city in the world”. We are in Chongqing (known to Americans as Chungking in World War II). It does have 33 million residents, but the city boundaries have been expanded to include the whole region of



Chongqing, an area the size of the European country of Austria. Chongqing was the WW2 China capital for Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist and was heavily bombed by the Japanese. The buildings are a mixture of old and new. In 1997 the government decided to "modernize" Chongqing. In 1997 there were no Five Star hotels; now there are 37 with 47 more under construction. 33 bridges have been built since that time. The traffic, however, is crazy as Chongqing sits at the confluence of two rivers and is ringed by high mountains; too many vehicles for the existing roads. The area has 10,000 manufacturing plants, primarily in automobiles, motorcycles, chemicals and pharmaceuticals and basic metal making. As in much of China the buses and taxis run on compressed natural gas. Because of the geography clear weather days are a rarity and today we have clouds, haze, and occasional light rain.

We are driving to the Chongqing Zoo to see the famous Pandas. We've learned that the Giant Panda is one of the rarest animals in the world and is naturally found only in Southwest China. They eat bamboo shoots and leaves (and a lot of them). We arrive at the zoo and our local guide quickly moves us through the beautifully landscaped zoo to the Panda area. First we see the Red Pandas which look something like large 15 pound raccoons. Then we are lucky and find that all five of the Giant Pandas at this zoo are out and enjoying their breakfast. We spend about half-an-hour watching them munch on bamboo, each sitting on a wooden platform in a separate area (we are told they are not very sociable with each other). Then we must leave for the airport and our noon flight. There is not enough time to see more of the zoo (or the museum honoring "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, the American commander of the allied effort in the Burma/China theater during WW2).







We board our flight and take off on time at 11:55AM for Guilin. Again, an easy time for us at the airport. Our checked bags were collected from outside of our cabins on the Katarina and we won't touch them again until we land at Guilin. At the airport, Peter gets all of our boarding passes and hands them out. We just have clear security (which is as rigorous as you have to go through in the USA) and board the plane. Our "rough flight" through turbulence lands in Southern China, at Guilin, at 1:15PM. Here, the temperature is 81 degrees and much brighter; the sun is trying to break through. This is the farthest south that we've yet been in China.

We board a motor coach and our local guide informs us about the Guilin region. We are in a sub-tropical area where it rarely reaches freezing temperatures. This is a more rural, farming area. Farmers live together in small villages and farm individual plots that average only about 1 acre in size. Typical crops are rice, fruits, peanuts, and sugar cane. Guilin is a "small city" of 700,000. The "Han" is the majority racial group in China, at 92%, but are a minority of 40% in the Guilin region. Guilin has a zoo with 1500 tigers and the largest condom factory in China. Its limestone geography is responsible for the unique dome shaped mountains and many caves that make this area famous.



We drive to the old farming village of Daxu where we see many old structures and many old Chinese.

Late in the afternoon we check in to our hotel in Guilin and are delighted to find that it exceeds our expectations. We have an included group dinner at a local restaurant and then Peter takes us on a walking tour of the shopping area around our hotel. At 7:15PM we all board a boat for an optional excursion. For the next hour the boat takes us through four small lakes, all surrounded with lighted trees. We pass under 12 bridges built to resemble famous bridges from all parts of the world. Our boat stops and we watch fishermen use their cormorant birds to catch fish for them; the birds can't

swallow the larger fish due to the rings that have been placed around their necks. At several spots on the boat ride local performers serenade us. This is another China attraction with a little bit of "Disney" mixed in.



At 8:30PM we make sure we are at 10 minutes each night, a 15 floor waterfall, with water flowing over ground. Yes, quite unique.



the central square when, for high hotel becomes a its roof and down to the

## China Trip – Day 16 – Friday October 14, 2011

We wake up this morning after the first of a two night stay at the Sheraton Hotel in Guilin, a small city in rural southern China. Today we will experience what we believe will be one of the highlights of our trip, a cruise on the Li River.

After the included breakfast at the hotel we board our motor coach at 8:30AM. The weather today should be perfect for our cruise; sunny skies and temperatures in the upper 70s. Our local guide gives us more information on the area. We pass a huge complex with high barbed wire covered walls and watch towers. Our guide confirms that it is a prison. He tells us that China's largest crime problem is, not surprisingly, robbery. China also has the death penalty. In addition to the possibility of receiving the death penalty for murder, a person can also receive it for killing a panda or a tiger, possession of more than 50 grams of heroin, or extreme political corruption. Such a sentence was recently handed down to the ex-mayor of Beijing!

After an hour ride we exit our motor coach and board a small ship for the cruise on the Li River. Our ship holds about 120 passengers on two enclosed decks. Each passenger has a padded seat facing a table. We are seated on the second deck. The roof of the boat is an open deck for viewing and picture taking. This is where we will spend most of our time.

Our trip on the Li River will start at the Zhujiang Wharfs and go downstream to Yangshuo a distance of about 45 miles. The trip is expected to take about 4-1/2 hours. The river water appears to be very clear and clean. As we are in the dry season, the water level is quite shallow. Marie jokes that she attended the ship's Safety Meeting and was told that in event of the ship being disabled "please step off the ship and walk to shore"!



Our trip down the river meets our high expectations. The route is lined with steep cliffs, dome shaped mountains, terraced fields on sides of mountains, and small villages. We enjoy watching the inhabitants go about their daily tasks. Also many small boats (in addition to the many large ones like our) plying the river. We see birds (including cormorants and ducks), water buffalos (used by the farmers to plow their steep fields), cows and mountain sheep. A buffet lunch is served which is not very good. We dock at Yangshuo after a most enjoyable cruise and walk for a while through the crowded market place and re-board our motor coach at about 2:30PM.

We have about an hour and a half ride back to our hotel in Guilin. We drive through rural countryside and stop to view a rice field. Our tour guides show to us and describe how rice is grown and harvested. We are told that China must import a lot of the rice that it consumes. Unfortunately, we now stop at the “China Institute For Tea Research” another one of the government run stores that we are told all local guides must make sure tourists are taken to. The next 1-1/2 hours are quite boring (at least for me) as we view and learn about tea plants, sit down and are lectured about tea, sample four varieties of tea during a high tea ceremony, and are then led to the showroom where we are asked to buy various teas and tea making and drinking accessories. I try to “escape” but we are in the “middle of nowhere” and I am bothered by the beggars as I attempt to walk around the complex.



Rice Field



A “Coolie”(wait; it’s Marcia) Picking Tea



Rush Hour

It is after 5PM when we finally re-board our motor coach. We enter Guilin at the height of Friday afternoon rush hour. This city, unlike the ones we visited in more northern areas of China, has probably more motor scooters (most of them powered by batteries) than cars. Traffic is a mess. It is past 6:15PM when we finally reach our hotel. Thoughts of a swim in the hotel pool and relaxation before dinner are forgotten as we must rush to dinner. This was a great day until our last stop which was “not my cup of tea”.

### **China Trip – Day 17 – Saturday October 15, 2011**

We wake up his morning after our second and last night’s sleep at the Sheraton Hotel in Guilin. We’ve really enjoyed this hotel; large comfortable rooms, bathrooms with a tub and a large shower, a good, if busy, restaurant and a great location near the lakes and rivers and in the middle of the shopping district.

We board a motor coach for a 20 minute ride to the Reed Flute Cave. Today is Saturday so we see many families out together enjoying the good weather. It will be another perfect weather day with sunny skies and temperatures in the upper 70s. On the way our local guide tells us that most Chinese workers work a 5 day work week, 8 hours a day. This is a change from 10 years ago when the standard work week was Monday through Saturday and the work days much longer than 8 hours. Civil Service employees work only a 7 hour work day. There is an exam for new civil servants once each year. There are 1000



applicants for every position. From 30 years ago, when all businesses were government run and farms collectivized, China has now moved to a “market economy”. Some private employers employ 50,000 people. The first floor of seemingly every building we see contains small stores.

At 9AM we start our tour of the Reed Flute Cave. We walk a 600 yard path through the caverns seeing thousands of stalactites, pillars and rock formations, all bathed in colored lights. I have been in larger caverns and deeper ones, but this is the most beautiful, as nearly every inch of the walls and ceilings are covered in “limestone erosion art”.



Back to the hotel and some free time before we check out at noon. We have lunch at a nearby restaurant and depart for the airport to catch our flight to Hong Kong. We have been very impressed with our 16 days in Mainland (Red) China. We are told that China has 3200 KFC chicken restaurants, 1300 McDonalds, and 500 Starbucks coffee shops. We always felt safe and welcomed and enjoyed our interactions with the Chinese people. We are amazed at the amount of new construction. Every city has hundreds of new hi-rise apartment and condo building recently finished or under construction. To some of us, however, it looks like a classic “housing bubble” may be forming. Businessmen are building these buildings and then trying to quickly sell the individual (internally unfinished) units, frequently to folks who buy them with the intent of reselling for a big profit within a few months. It is apparent that many of the units are sitting empty. At nighttime in the cities we see scores of tall buildings with no lights on. The China government is concerned, and has raised interest rates for folks trying to buy second residents all in an effort to cool things down.



We board our China Southern Airlines Boeing 737 and take off on time at 3:50PM. We land in Hong Kong, on the coast of southeastern China, at 5PM. The weather is clear; temperature 80 degrees. Although many consider Hong Kong to now be part of “Red” China, administered from Beijing, it’s really still treated as a separate country. Mainland Chinese cannot enter Hong Kong without a visa. We need to go through passport control when our flight lands.

Here’s some brief information on Hong Kong and its current political status: Hong Kong’s population is 7.3 million. It consists of three main areas, Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories as well as about 200 small islands. Total area is 416 square miles. As a result of the Opium Wars, China ceded Hong Kong Island and Kowloon to Great Britain “forever” in the mid-1800s. The area was very lightly populated. The English planned to use the land to build a trading port. The New Territories, the largest by far of the three main parts of Hong Kong, was leased to Great Britain for 99 years in 1898.

In the 1900s Hong Kong grew to be a dynamic modern city and the financial center of Asia, in contrast to China which remained in an economic morass until recent years. With their lease on the New Territories running out in 1998, Great Britain realized that there was no way that the smaller areas of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon could absorb the 3 million Hong Kong residents that would flee the New Territories for Hong Kong Island and Kowloon if the New Territories were given back to China. For this and some other reasons Great Britain agreed to the return of all of Hong Kong to China in 1997 with China promising to maintain, for 50 years, the “Hong Kong System” under the “One Country, Two Systems” plan. Today Hong Kong is considered a “Special Administrative District” of China with relatively free speech and politics. You still drive on the “wrong side of the road” in Hong Kong and they maintain their own currency, the Hong Kong Dollar.

At the Hong Kong Airport Peter leads us through passport control and to the luggage claim area in this huge, relatively new airport. We meet our Local Guide, Polly, and board a motor coach for a one hour drive to our hotel. On our ride we pass bustling ports, go over great bridges (one suspension bridge is 1-1/2 miles long), into a long tunnel through a mountain and under a bay seeing many brightly lit skyscrapers and apartment buildings. Polly tells us that the typical Hong Kong apartment is only 450 square feet, so we will see a lot of Hong Kong residents on the streets, as they like to get out of their small apartments to move around and to eat. The streets are “bustling” as it is Friday night.

We arrive at our hotel at about 6:45PM. It’s the Langham Place in the Mong Kok area of Kowloon. The hotel is 6 years old and should be among the nicest we’ve stayed in on this vacation. We are assigned rooms on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor. They are great and have nice views of the city. At 7:30PM our Tour Director, Peter Wong, offers an orientation walk/subway ride

for those interested. Marie, Kal, Marcia and I decide to explore on our own. Rather than walk the crowded streets we have learned that our hotel is connected, by an elevated walkway, to a 16 story high shopping mall. We walk over and enjoy watching the mostly young Hong Kong residents swarming through the mall on a Friday night. We make our way to the top floor and enjoy a nice pizza dinner. Later we go down to the first floor and access an ATM to acquire some Hong Kong Dollars. Marcia and I go in to a supermarket on the first floor and buy some provisions for our hotel room.



Our Hotel Room



View of Hong Kong from our room



Shopping Mall view from our room

### **China Trip – Day 18 – Sunday October 16, 2011**

We wake up this morning after the first of three nights at the Langham Place Hotel in Hong Kong in southeastern China. After breakfast we all board our motor coach at 8:30AM and start a tour of the city. Today will be another perfect weather day, sunny with a high of 82 and a low of 72 degrees.

It's Sunday morning so traffic is light. We first drive down Hong Kong's main "high end" shopping street, Nathan Road, which is one block from our hotel. We next drive a short distance to the end of the Kowloon Peninsula and view the old Peninsula Hotel and several museums, all the time with good commentary from Peter, our Tour Director, and Polly, our local guide and a Hong Kong native. This is also Peter's home. He was born and raised in Hong Kong and lives with his wife in an apartment in the New Territories. It is apparent that Peter loves his home town and wants us to really enjoy our short stay here in Hong Kong.

We get off of our motor coach and walk to the pier where we have a nice view of Hong Kong Island and the financial district across the strait. We now walk over to the Star Ferry Terminal to take the 8 minute boat ride across Hong Kong Harbor from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island. This is a ride that many commuters take to work each day. Our motor coach will travel, empty of passengers, through one of the three underwater tunnels that connect these two parts of Hong Kong and then pick us up on the other side. Now, passengers 65 years and older ride for free on the Star Ferry. This applies to 13 of the folks in our group of 23, and Polly asks them to line up in another line as she pays the fee for the rest of us. Everyone is surprised when Kal joins the "free ticket" line; he's certainly one of the most youthful looking of our tour's "senior citizens"!



We enjoy the 8 minute ride on the Star Ferry to Hong Kong City. Our motor coach picks us up and now drives us to the start of the Tram Ride to the top of Victoria Peak. Built in 1888, the cable-driven tram goes right up the side of Victoria Peak, from sea level to a height of 1300 feet. The eight minute ride is exciting. At the top we have about 45 minutes to wander around and enjoy views (although a sight haze lies over the city) of Hong Kong City, Kowloon and Hong Kong Harbor. We next drive to the south side of Hong Kong Island, first driving to Repulse Bay and its pristine beach. This whole



area of Hong Kong is like nothing else that we have seen in China or Hong Kong. It is hilly with lush vegetation everywhere. Mansions, homes and resorts dot the area. The beaches and the views of the coast remind us of Hawaii, the Caribbean or the Mediterranean. We stop and have about an hour to walk around, first to the beach area and then to shop in the Stanley Market. Stanley Market is an area containing hundreds of

little shops selling silk garments, sportswear, art, Chinese jewelry and souvenirs.



By now it is 12:30PM and we drive to Aberdeen Bay, a large harbor on the south side of the island. We board motorized "sampans" for a twenty minute ride around the harbor. We see many yachts, pleasure boats, and numerous fishing boats. Most interesting are the few remaining houseboats which people live on as their only residence.

The sampans drop us off at The Jumbo Floating Restaurant, which is decorated to look like a huge ancient Chinese Palace. Peter first walks us to an area of the restaurant that has numerous tanks holding the live fish that will be used for customer meals and describes to us each species. Next we are seated in the restaurant and enjoy a Cantonese style Dim Sum lunch.



We drive back to our hotel seeing more scenic areas before exiting Hong Kong Island and driving through one of the tunnels under Hong Kong Bay and back to Kowloon. We arrive at our hotel about 3PM and spend the rest of the afternoon either resting or walking around past the many shops near our hotel.

At 6:30PM Marie, Kal, Marcia and Jim meet and take a taxi from our hotel to the ferry pier area near the Peninsula Hotel at the end of the Kowloon Peninsula. The fare for the 10 minute ride is about 30 Hong Kong dollars or 4 US

dollars. The sun sets before 6PM so we are here to see the lights on the many skyscrapers across the bay on Hong Kong Island. At 8PM we enjoy the nightly 20 minute “laser show”, bright beams of light flashing from the tops of buildings on both sides of the bay. Several thousand people have come to see the laser show, so we also enjoy “people watching”. A quick cab ride back to our hotel and we have an excellent late dinner (pizza) on an outdoor patio of one of our hotel’s restaurants.



### **China Trip – Day 19 – Monday October 17, 2011**

We wake up after our second night at the excellent Langham Place Hotel in Hong Kong, China. We have a nice view from our room, but the view from Marie and Kal’s room, across the hall from us on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor is even better. They can see Hong Kong Bay and part of the Financial District on Hong Kong Island.

After breakfast we meet our Tour Director, Peter, in the hotel lobby at 9AM. Today is listed as a “free day” on our itinerary but Peter has offered to take us on a walking tour of some of the markets in the area. 15 members of our tour group have opted to go on Peter’s walking tour. We believe the other folks are on a day tour (via the hydrofoil high speed boat) to the ex-Portuguese colony of Macao, home of many casinos.



Peter has previously explained to us that it is typical in Chinese cities to have stores offering similar products and services clustered together. In Shanghai we drove down one street of small stores all just selling wedding dresses. As we drove into Kowloon on Saturday night, Peter pointed out the “Red Light District” (which we have not been able to again find; it’s hard to find your way around this city). Today, on our way to our first “market” we walk down a street with small shops only selling products like flooring and carpet, toilet and plumbing fixtures, kitchen sinks and cabinets, etc.



Peter explains that when you buy a new apartment/condo, it comes unfinished. You hire a contractor to finish it out, and come to a street like this, with your contractor, to pick out the products for him to install.

This city is bustling on a Monday morning. Walking on these crowded sidewalks can be stressful, but, unlike in Mainland China, vehicles obey traffic signals and it is safe to cross streets at crosswalks. Peter finds some elevated pedestrian walkways that get us above the crowded streets and sidewalks for part of our journey. Our first “market” is the Fruit Market and we see stall after stall of familiar and exotic fruit. Next is the Flower Market where rows of similar small stores (typically the first floor stores are about 20 feet wide by 60 feet deep) display all types of flowers. Next, we go to the Bird Market where people come to sell and buy birds. These are birds like Parakeets and Parrots, meant to be kept as pets. Also all kinds of bird supplies are being sold, like bird cages and live food for birds. Inexpensive birds are also sold for folks to purchase and set free. This is said to give you good karma/good luck. Peter jokes that farmers then recapture the same birds and sell them at the Bird Market.

Last is the Fish Market where many stores are selling live fish for home aquariums. On a wall Peter points out a poster advising Hong Kong residents how to register to receive 6200 Hong Kong dollars each from the government (about 720 US\$). Peter explained that the Hong Kong government, despite very low taxes, has a large budget surplus. The legislature voted on to whether to spend it on needed hospitals and schools, or give the money, evenly, back to all residents. The give-back won.

We walk back to our hotel a little before noon. Marcia chooses to spend the afternoon exploring the 16 story shopping mall that’s connected to our hotel by a walkway. Marie, Kal and I take a taxi to the Hong Kong Historical Museum and enjoy the very good exhibits covering the history of Hong Kong from pre-historic times until now. Of particular interest was the section on the Opium Wars (a shameful event where England, needing a “commodity” to ship to China to balance out the tea and porcelain that was being shipping back to England, grew opium in India and shipped it to China, causing untold thousands to become addicted to the mind numbing drug), the Japanese occupation during WW2 (when half of the population of Hong Kong, 1 million people, was deported deep into mainland China as the Japanese did not have the food or the plans to feed the population of Hong Kong) and the more recent period covering the reunification of Hong Kong with Mainland China.

At 6PM our tour group meets in the hotel lobby for our “Goodbye Dinner” and it’s a spectacular one. We take our motor coach to the top of Victoria Peak and dine in a special area that Peter has arranged for us. We gaze out over the skyscrapers and lights of Hong Kong.





View from our table at the Farewell Dinner

Tomorrow we depart for home.

### **China Trip – Day 20 – Tuesday October 18, 2011**

We wake up this morning after a three night stay at the Langham Place Hotel in Hong Kong. We have really enjoyed our stay here. The rooms, views, restaurants, location and staff have all been excellent. This will be our last morning in Asia.

15 members of our tour group, including the four of us, depart our hotel at 8:30AM bound for the Hong Kong airport. The other 8 folks on our tour have later flights and will go out to the airport this afternoon. We are accompanied by our Local Hong Kong Guide Polly and our Tour Director Peter Wong. Polly has been great, but we all think Peter has been a truly exceptional Tour Director. He's led this trip many times and clearly has probably had a strong hand in its overall design. He seems to know everybody (at the hotels, restaurants, and sites) and makes sure our group gets exceptional service. He's always there to cheerfully take care of any problems large or small. His group briefings, either on the motor coach or at sites, are always interesting and informative. Our tour company Odysseys Unlimited pays to cover all tips on their tours, the exception being the tip for the Tour Director and we all make sure to pass to Peter, today, tips reflecting our thanks to him. He tells us he will be starting another "China in Depth" tour, with a full group of 24 people, in two days. He says the weather forecast for the next week in China call for sharply cooler weather. The weather today is clear and warm; highs will reach 80 degrees. Boy, we sure have had great weather on this vacation!

Our trip to the airport takes about an hour and we enjoy the daytime views as our trip in from the airport was at night. As we saw in China, many scaffolding-clad high rises under construction. Unlike in the USA where we use metal scaffolding and wood planks, all scaffolding in China is bamboo! We've seen 90 story skyscrapers with their top floors wrapped with bamboo scaffolding and broken windows on a high rise being replaced with bamboo scaffolding affixed to the building exterior. We are told there are special schools that teach the "art" of constructing bamboo scaffolds.



We arrive at the airport and quickly check baggage and clear Passport Control. We board our United Airlines flight for an on time departure at 11:50AM. We are on a full (and old) 747 with 368 passengers. Our flight “from the other side of the globe” to Chicago takes 14 hours and covers 7900 miles. We land in Chicago at 2AM China time but 1PM Chicago time on the same day that we left China, as we passed over the International Date Line. The Tinkas and the Elvings both catch connecting flights and reach their homes in Dayton and Malta at about 8PM; 26 hours after we awoke in Hong Kong.

We all agreed this was a great vacation. Here’s the four of our “votes” on the good and the bad:

#### The Good

- The Hotels (including the good ship Katarina)
- The historical Sites and Attractions we visited
- Excellent, efficient Airports, Security, and new and on-time Airplanes (this refers to China.....N/A to the USA)
- The Weather
- The Chinese People and the Chinese Culture
- The Architecture, both the old and the new
- Our fellow Odysseys Unlimited Tour Members
- Design and pace of the Odysseys Unlimited Itinerary
- Our Tour Director, Peter Wong, and the Local Guides that were employed at each destination

#### The Bad

- The “smogginess” we encountered in the Yangtze Gorges during our cruise (which may be normal)
- The crowds during the first week (which was China’s national vacation week.....but we were expecting this)
- The Chinese habit of “cutting in to lines” and being quite noisy in areas where we are used to quiet, like museums
- Seeing the poor living conditions many Chinese still live in
- The Souvenir Vendors (but not as bad as Egypt!)

The Traffic in China and lack of regard for pedestrian traffic (not applicable to Hong Kong)

It was hard to find Diet Sodas (this was a big one for Marcia!)

### Favorites

Hotel – Sofitel Wanda in Beijing and the Langham Place in Hong Kong (although all the hotels were very good)

Local Tour Guide – Vivian in Beijing and Ping in Shanghai

Required Government Store Stop – Jade Store

Tourist Site – The Great Wall, the Li River cruise, the Terra Cotta Warriors, and the Pandas in Chongqing

Dinner – The Dumpling Dinner and the Farewell Dinner at Victoria Peak

Hotel Buffet Breakfast – Sofitel Wanda and Beijing (although all were great)

City – Guilin and Hong Kong

Critter – The Pandas

Best Thing About the Trip – Our Tour Director: “The Great” Peter Wong

Worst Thing – Mandatory 1-1/2 hour stop at the “Tea Institute” in Guilin on Day 16

