



China

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I spent two weeks in China in October, visiting Shanghai, Nanjing and Beijing. I would urge anyone who has even a remote interest in Asia to visit China. And for those that think they have no interest in Asia, believe me, you are missing out on a startling place. I say startling because everything hits you in China - the noise and chaotic nature of the traffic and bicycles, the sheer volume of the crowds on the street, the colourful street decorations, the terrible air pollution, and the smallness of the shacks that so many of the people live in juxtaposed against soaring new skyscrapers and western style shops.

The best thing about China is its people. Groups of schoolchildren will happily greet you with a chorus of Hello's, and young mothers clutching babies outside their tiny dilapidated houses in the *hutongs* (local streets) will proudly show off their offspring to you. You will get great service in most shops, because there is usually about 5 staff to each customer (which makes you understand how difficult it will be for China to reform without massive unemployment). Guards stand in the middle of intersections waving through traffic, despite the existence of traffic lights and the fact most vehicles ignore such directions and go where they like when they like.

Highlights are of course The Great Wall, Tienenmen Square (don't mention "the incident"), the Forbidden City (cf "The Last Emperor"), local restaurants where you can get a scrumptious chinese meal for around \$3AUD including beer, marketplaces where you can get great cheap name brand

clothing, and cigarette lighters with a picture of Chairman Mao on it that plays "The East is Red" when you flip it open.

The Underground City in Beijing was also a highlight. Many locals don't know it's there, as the entrances are hidden out the back of shops. Finding an entrance is a challenge. You'll find yourself walking through local residential streets packed with tiny shacks where the common people live. IF you can find one of these entrances (very difficult without a local to take you), you pay to go down some stairs and along an enormous system of tunnels that were designed to be used in case of air raids by the Russians. A guide walks you through the tunnel to a point where a souvenir shop is. You can't help but question the location of this shop, considering it is underground and very difficult for tourists to find! The underground city is worth visiting if only for the adventure of finding it!

Learning about China's history, and future, is also fascinating. Of course it helps if you travel with someone that speaks the language (as I did), and China would be a much more difficult place to travel in without such a luxury. You would be very unlikely to find the nightlife if you are on your own. But it's there, and it's happening. Something you don't quite expect to see in communist China!

All up, I spent about \$2,500. The airfare was very cheap \$1,000 (Qantas) including an internal flight on Air China). I highly recommend China for a cheap, memorable holiday!

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