

2004:

Beijing was in some ways more difficult than Shanghai. Traffic is always worse there, and it was hotter, although not yet unbearably hot. We stayed at the Friendship Hotel in Dongguancun, China's Silicon Valley. Advertisements everywhere were not for finished computers, but for pieces of computers: Chips, LCD screens for laptops, and so forth. The Friendship Hotel predates this new prosperity, though: It was built in 1951 to house foreign experts, mostly (originally) from the Soviet Union. It's one of the world's largest hotels (335,000 square meters; a square meter is about ten square feet), a Stalinist-era relic like the Hotel Rossiya in Moscow and the more recent (and utterly insane) 105-story Ryugyong Hotel in Pyongyang, North Korea. (A 1,083-foot-tall hotel in a country that no one ever visits – the perfect investment for a government whose people are starving.) Unlike these monstrosities, though, the planners of the Friendship Hotel cleverly broke the hotel up into a dozen or so buildings, none more than four or five stories high, situated in a gray-green Chinese landscape painting wonderland of rock gardens, goldfish ponds, curved bridges, carved gates, dovescotes, waterfalls, teahouses, pavilions, and calligraphed columns. (The hotel also houses 26 restaurants – we only ate at two; we gave TGI Friday's a miss.) The buildings themselves also managed to avoid being built as Soviet-style cement cubes; they have tiled roofs with upswept eaves. Inside they seemed to have been extensively renovated. Our own floor was done in Southwest style: light wood and unbleached fabrics on the walls, broken up with mosaics of patterned but unglazed terracotta tiles every twenty feet or so, Navajo-patterned sofas in the lobby... Unless you looked out the window you might have thought yourself in Taos or Santa Fe rather than Beijing.

Sights

The Lama Temple is a Tibetan Buddhist temple or, more technically, a Lamaist (Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist) temple. It's the home of the Panchen Lama, the Dalai Lama's chief spiritual rival. Most of the complex is closed to tourists, so we couldn't actually drop in on the Lama. It reminded me in many ways of the Vatican: At the Vatican, the devout religious pilgrims are outnumbered by the merely curious, picture-taking tourists, but they're there; the same was true here. Pilgrims from across the world, from Japan to Sri Lanka, were lighting incense and saying prayers. And at the Vatican, beyond the Sistine Chapel, a hallway leads to the Pope's personal apartments; two Swiss Guards stand in the hall and keep visitors from disturbing the pontiff. At the Lama Temple we found a map that showed us where the Panchen Lama's apartments were; we couldn't get there, though, because a small courtyard with two Tibetan monks, serving the same function as the Swiss guards, was in the way. And, as at the Vatican, you had to get there before the tour buses arrived, and leave once they started to disgorge their cargo.

Climbing on the sacred animals

The streets around the Lama Temple are filed with shops selling religious artifacts; just a couple of blocks away is the Kongmiao, a huge Confucian temple complex. We walked over, stopping on the way to buy ice cream from a man with five caged mynah birds outside his shop. "Ni hao ma," said the birds.

The Kongmiao is huge, and in welcome contrast to the Lama Temple was almost completely empty. Everywhere around the complex were steles inscribed with the names of scholars who had passed the Imperial Examinations – long-dead meritocrats.

We also explored Beijing's famous hutongs – alleyways lined with traditional walled courtyard houses – and Yiheyuan, the Summer Palace, with its bridges, towers, mansions, pavilions, and the bricked-up windows of the house where the empress Cixi imprisoned her son, the emperor.

Beijing has a large Muslim population – perhaps as many as half a million Muslims. About half of these are Hui, ethnic Chinese Muslims whose ancestors have, in some cases, lived in Beijing for over a thousand years. The rest are members of ethnic minorities from Xinjiang province, mostly Uighurs. For the visitor this Muslim presence is reflected in mosques, which mostly look more Chinese than Middle Eastern, and in restaurants. One of the best meals I ate on this trip was at a small Muslim (Hui) restaurant in the Dongcheng neighborhood.

Speaking of food, the other best meal I had was at an outdoor restaurant below the Great Wall at Juyongguan. The restaurant had a swimming-pool-sized fish tank in which diners could net their own fish; I tried several vegetarian dishes, including willow buds and five-color eggplant (eggplant smothered beneath bands of chopped red peppers, raw garlic, cilantro and onion). Unfortunately I didn't take down the name of either this or the Muslim restaurant; though I could find either again or give directions to anyone who would like to look for them.

The Cantonese restaurant at the Friendship Hotel was good, but not spectacular. Another building housed a Chinese nouvelle-cuisine restaurant – exotic ingredients prepared in unusual ways, all low-fat, low sodium, and perhaps even low-carb; kiwi and watermelon smoothies instead of tea. It was pretty good too, actually.

On Friday I gave a talk at Beijing University – the same talk as at Fudan, but to an audience of 95 people. I was actually pleased to be able to draw such a large audience, as Prof. Zhang (the woman who had invited me to speak) told me that I was competing in the same time slot as the president of Colombia. I thought of Alvaro Uribe, and wondered where his security was. But it turned out to be Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia, not Colombia; he was presumably in no danger of assassination, unless Beijing University harbors a deep-cover mole for NYU.

The Beijing University campus is a tourist attraction in its own right, with a lake, a new \$100 million (U.S.!) library, and of course its famous and iconic water tower. The university has three distinct architectural modes: The older buildings (and some new ones, like the library) in traditional Chinese style (tiled roofs with upswept eaves and end-capped rafter tails); a deplorable “middle period” of hideous prefab blocks, obviously slapped up at a time when money was tight (I was reminded of the “temporary buildings” at UCSD); and a lot of weird-looking postmodern buildings put up in the last decade.

The law school has two buildings: A hideous old slab and a new glass building, very nice inside.

In Beijing and Shanghai, at least, the old China can be difficult to find. On my first trip to China, goods were still sold on the sidewalk by merchants who weighed produce with a weighing stick and tallied up purchases on an abacus. Shanghai and Beijing are now cities where teenagers yak endlessly on cell phones and the streets are clogged with Audis, BMWs, Mercedes and VWs. (German carmakers really seem to have succeeded in the Chinese market; after Chinese brands, German brands seemed to be the most common. Some Japanese brands are around, too – Toyota, Nissan and Mitsubishi – and a lot of taxis are Citroens. The only American brands that were visible at all were Buicks and the occasional Beijing Jeep.)

On Sunday, we made an excursion to the Great Wall, stopping first at Juyongguan, a section that was only restored in 1997. We skipped the Wall itself, which was already packed with tourists and which looked not ancient but about seven years old, and visited the nearby temples, also restored. The temples were, for some reason, almost empty (in many cases completely empty), even though they were only a short distance from the Wall. A few worshippers were there, and the temple staff, and us; that was about it. These were not Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian temples but what guidebooks seem to call “folk religion temples” or, inaccurately, “ancestor-worship temples.” I decided to think of them as animist, and particularly liked the Temple of the Horse God. (At one time Juyongguan housed a cavalry unit.)

At Juyongguan I was mildly surprised to encounter a package tour from Vietnam; a sign, perhaps, that Vietnam isn't going to stay poor, either. By the time we got to Badaling we were all pretty tired; we took the cable car up, strolled around the Wall for a while, and rode back down.

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2001:

The long-term parking lot at LAX, which the attendant had assured me on the phone “never fills up,” was full. So was the alternate lot. So were all of the private lots on Century Boulevard. Finally we found a place behind a still-under-construction-Marriott, and off we went. The flight was long, of course, but eventually we landed in Beijing and headed to our hotel. Had dinner at a mushroom restaurant – the only restaurant I've ever seen specializing in dishes made from various kinds of mushrooms. Got up at 3:40 or so the next morning to catch sunrise and the flag-raising ceremony at Tiananmen Square. Drove up to the Ming Tombs (not worth a special trip unless you really enjoy that sort of thing) and the Great Wall (worth coming all the way from San Diego for). The Great

Wall is one of those tourist destinations like the Grand Canyon: You know what it looks like, you've seen plenty of pictures, and yet...

The next two days, back in Beijing, to the Forbidden City, Tiantan and Beihai Park, and Tiananmen again. This was my first visit to Beijing; compared to Shanghai, it's very relaxing to walk in – spacious, tree-shaded sidewalks (apparently the trees are new, planted as part of Beijing's preparation for its latest Olympic bid, but they replace older trees cut down during the Cultural Revolution). Traffic is bad, though; lots of bottlenecks.

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San Diego 2001