

Greetings From China: Part 5

Visitors To Orient Take Trip Into Interior

Following is the fifth in a series of excerpts from a recent letter from Warren County native Mrs. Carolyn Satterwhite Schoonover who is in China with her husband, an agricultural counselor with the U. S. Government, stationed at the American Embassy in Beijing.

The countryside was mountainous around the city and more humid and lush looking than Xian. There were oleander and banana trees in a few places, lotus plants, rice paddies and strange vegetables growing along the roadside. We even saw a few China Berry trees. To me this looked more the China I had envisioned. Chong Qing the city disappointed me in this respect.

It is almost an hour's drive from the airport and after driving through the lushness along the roadside it was disappointing to find that the city was grey, drab, and very dirty. The streets twist and turn and it was impossible to keep a sense of direction. It is an industrial city—a Chinese version of Wheeling, W. Va.

Our hotel there was modeled after the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. It was a huge building with a central three-story dome and two flanking pagodas with soaring rooflines. The eaves were painted with gold and red lacquer and massive stone steps lead up to a central auditorium.

We rested for an hour or so before visiting the highest point in the city. On the top of this point is a seven-story tower. From the tower one could see for miles. The old inner city was laid out below on an island-like parcel at the junction of the rivers. On the opposite banks, the new city stairstepped up the mountains for as far as the eye could see. We were in the middle of China!

Later we visited some gardens and an artists' colony. This colony is government-controlled. Some of the artists have lived in the compound for 30 years. Much of their earnings go back to the government.

Before dusk we drove around some in the city and down to the ferry landing. We were struck by how dirty the streets were. There were more filth and spit on the sidewalks than in Beijing. In fact there was so much that walking was hazardous.

The next morning we were scheduled to catch a boat for the three-day tour down the Yangtze River. We barely made it. The boat was overbooked and they tried to put us off. We staged a sit-in and refused to leave. Dave used his diplomatic status, the only time I've known him to do so. He explained that we had had our reservations for weeks, that we couldn't rearrange our plans. If we had to get off we were going back to Beijing and demand all our money back. In addition we were going to report their ineptness to the highest officials. Whether this worked or not I don't know but for whatever reason they allowed us to stay.

Our poor Chinese guide was so upset he was almost in tears. It really wasn't his fault but he was the one who had to deal with the situation. If what we did seemed pushy, it must be understood that once you are on a trip here there is no way to change plans. There are no computer reservations. Everything is done by telegraph or mail weeks ahead of time. If you miss a connection you are stranded unless you get lucky. So that's why we persisted.

In addition to ourselves, there were two American school teachers and two Hong Kong families with small children who were "in the same boat with us"—stranded also. None of us had rooms.

Finally the situation was resolved by putting the Hong Kong families into crew quarters and our family shared the game room with the school teachers. We immediately struck up a friendship with them and continue to communicate with them in the United States.

Sheets were hung over the windows and we were given pallets to sleep on. The only problem was the lack of private rest rooms. We had to trot down the halls and wait for some of the other tourists

who were too lazy to go to their own rooms to the rest rooms. The floors were wet and the toilets stopped up easily. So, we didn't bathe for three days. It wasn't so bad though since the boat was clean and air-conditioned.

The boat was large and there were several observation decks, a bar, dance floor, restaurant lounge and a small pool.

That afternoon as we moved down the river it began to narrow and we knew that in the morning we would be entering the famous Three Gorges. Along the river banks we could see small houses perched on impossible looking bits of land. Crops were planted in perpendicular rows right up hillsides. There was no attempt at terracing. We couldn't see how anyone could walk there much less farm it.

In the flat areas, patches of yellow corn spread out to dry made patterns against the green hills. Small sampans anchored in rocky coves. Other boats and ferries passed us.

Late that evening we docked at an industrial city along the river. Effluent ran into the river and great chunks of something resembling styrofoam floated by the boat. Small boys swam amidst the chunks. Buildings seemed to rise straight up and out of the river and up the hillsides.

From the boat dock stretched the longest set of steps I've ever seen. To me the city looked pretty grim and I wasn't interested in seeing it any closer, but some of the tourists who did said it wasn't so bad looking once you got away from the river.

The mealtime situation on the boat was not pleasant. Since there were 12 extra passengers on the boat there should have been another table set up. As it was, there was a constant scurrying and scuffling to get seats. Many people ate standing. The first evening it was announced that we should sit in the same places each time. This was generally ignored.

The majority of the other tourists were Japanese. We found that in general, as tour groups, they were aggressive, pushy and obnoxious. On a one-to-one basis, they were different; but put together in groups they were overwhelming. We found that we (the 10 or so Americans on board) were constantly having to juggle in order to maintain our status aboard ship—get to meals early in order to reserve our seats, etc. In addition we found that we were seeking spaces on the ship that were as far removed from the Japanese as possible.

But aside from the mealtime problem, sleeping and bathroom arrangements, the trip was wonderful. The gorges were everything they were said to be. It was like travelling down a green Grand Canyon or through Glacier or Yellowstone Park by boat. For three days we stood on the observation deck until we were burned by wind and sun.

On our last night out, the captain apologized to us for the mix-up on our rooms and refunded all our money. Later we overheard other tourists talking about being put off the boat because of over-booking. They got off instead of staying and fighting. Obviously it is a constant problem. We had the feeling not very many tourists buck the system. The captain seemed too sharp and intelligent to be willing to apologize to and reimburse someone on every trip. I believe he would have rolled some heads if he had known it was an everyday occurrence.

On the third and last day, the hillsides leveled out and the river widened and ahead of us was a dam and a set of locks. Our boat came into the locks first with three more behind us. Chinese lined the walls to watch the ships sink. That's exactly what we did. As the water was pumped out, we sank 22 meters or about 70 feet in just a few minutes. When the gates were reopened we were down to the original river level again.

We ended our river tour at Wuhan. It is three cities in one, separated by two rivers. Each has a downtown and a distinct flavor all its own. It is a hill city

with many trees and varied architecture. (It also has served as China's capital.)

Some effort had been made there to control traffic. Overhead pedestrian bridges had been constructed over many intersections. From these bridges we stood and watched life flow by. There were many gaudy signs, fluorescent lights, wrought iron grills and balconies. I was reminded of pictures of Hong Kong or U.S. China towns.

On one of the open air market streets, we threaded our way between vendors selling live chickens, ducks, buckets of turtles, live eels—some of which had managed to slither out of the buckets and into crevices in the street. The turtles were sold with their shells cut off and innards still quivering. Farther down the alley were slaughtered meats and exotic vegetables. Every few steps were difficult, dodging bicycles, jostling shoppers, slipping on wet cobblestones. It was such a relief to get out.

Our hotel in Wuhan was new and relatively nice but service and food left something to be desired. It was not just that we were getting tired of Chinese food but that the food was repetitious and not well prepared or served. Waitresses were often sullen and slow and it just became a hassle to eat.

We found it amusing that the elevators were either for odd- or even-numbered floors. Wouldn't you know we got on the wrong one right off and had to carry our luggage down a floor.

On Aug. 8, we flew into the airport at Shanghai. Brian and Kathy and I had come through this airport on our arrival in China. This time it looked different as we arrived through the internal reception area and not international.

When our guide met us we were surprised to be taken to a chauffeur driven Chrysler limo. Somehow they had gotten the word that we were not regular tourists but from the American embassy. That was all right with us! It was great fun and very comfortable riding around in a limo. At the same time it was embarrassing having people stare at us, especially when they were other American tourists.

One night we went to an acrobatic show. On that particular night, practically the whole arena was reserved for tourists. Most of them had arrived by bus and were waiting outside when we arrived in the limo. They began pointing at us and I'm sure they were wondering who we thought we were. To make matters worse, our driver took his part very seriously and pulled rank to get a parking spot. Oh well, take the good with the bad!

The acrobatic show, by the way, was wonderful and we were very impressed with some of the acts. We especially enjoyed the animal acts since we see so few animals here.

Shanghai is a different type of Chinese city. We sensed it immediately. It is more orderly. Much of the city was built under foreign occupation and is, therefore, more European in feel. There are recognizable neighborhoods, centers of commerce, business, shopping, whatever. There is a definite downtown.

The blend of architecture is exciting but unfortunately many of the old buildings are being torn down and replaced with highrises. We saw quaint Dutch style buildings being razed and it broke my heart. It's what gives Shanghai its uniqueness.

Up until recently most development money has been poured into Beijing, hence all the new hotels, improved streets, etc. Shanghai has been left to fend for itself until now. Two new joint venture hotels are under construction at the edge of the city, and one was due to open this fall.

Downtown are the older European built hotels with high ceilings, ornate mouldings, lighting fixtures, ceiling fans, etc. We stayed in the Mansions, which has been extensively remodeled and which has a western style restaurant. The rooms were adequate, nothing fancy. We found

the elevators there amusing also. They were fully automated with a perfectly modulated computer voice repeating in English every floor "... floor, going up, ... floor, going down" and so on. We had great fun mimicking it each time.

From our hotel window we could look out over the harbor and see the "Bund," the old financial district of the city. Nearby was a park where couples strolled by the hundreds and looked out at the ships docked on the river.

Shanghai is one of the largest ports in the world, just how immense we found out as we toured it by boat. It went on for miles, one ship after another, both sides of the river and down the middle, with flags from every nation.

The river is terribly polluted. Even the air smells of it. So does the drinking water. We almost couldn't bear to drink it.

Let me explain here about drinking water in China. It must be boiled everywhere. It is assumed that the hotels boil the water. Drinking water is provided in flasks in each room along with a cup for tea and one for brushing one's teeth. It is not to be assumed that water used for ice has been boiled.

When out on the street it is generally safe to drink the local soft drinks, or beer. Usually they are hot. Coca Cola has a large factory here and of course we are happy about that because that means Cokes are available almost everywhere. There are even imported Pepsi's, Sprite and Fanta Orange drink. Just to be on the safe side we drank mostly bottled soft drinks on the trip.

In Shanghai, we ate western food for the first time in a week. It was wonderful but still didn't help the stomach problems we had developed along the way.

On our last evening in Shanghai we had our driver drop us off at the Peace Hotel. There is a bar there which looks exactly the way it did when built over 40 years ago. (It was described in the book

"Shanghai" which I had just finished reading.) It was dark, stale and seedy looking. The old marble walls and columns were stained and Christmas lights were strung around the high ceilings. In one corner played a small combo whose major repertoire consisted of 40's songs. One could just imagine what it must have been like to have lived in the foreign community of Shanghai at that time. It is still a busy place.

In its earlier days, Shanghai was a notoriously sinful city. There were so many kidnappings and abductions that the name has become synonymous with it. Pro-

stitution, gambling, opium dens, you name it. Every vice prospered there.

As interesting as Shanghai was, it was a relief to leave and get away from the stifling heat. We traveled by train this time, not air-conditioned but there was sufficient breeze to keep us cool. Our stomach bugs were really giving us a rough time so we were glad the train ride wasn't a long one. (Bathrooms on the trains here are almost impossible to use. The floors are wet, the car is lurching and there is generally no paper.)

(To be continued)

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