

Mike's China



Fun Tales and Advice

by

Mike Dixon

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By Mike Dixon

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I have travelled extensively in China over the past twenty years, on climbing expeditions and as a general tourist. The stories in this book were written to entertain and provide travel advice.

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1 Getting around



There was a time when tourists needed to join a group or hire a guide to visit China. Those days have gone but the myth remains. Part of the problem is the description that is applied to the country.

We're told that that China is an emerging economy. This gives the impression of inadequate transport, substandard accommodation, poor sanitation and all those other things associated with the "underdeveloped world".

The picture is partially correct. There are regions of China that are still "emerging". Others have most definitely "emerged". It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are as many people in China with a comfortable standard of living as there are in Western Europe or the USA.

What's more, the housing and public amenities, in those parts of China that have "emerged", are newer and more modern than in Europe and America. The parts I am talking about are mainly on the coast. There is a big east-west divide in China.

You can, of course, join a group to visit Beijing and Shanghai or tour the picturesque towns along the Grand Canal. But there's no need. The whole eastern region of the country is well equipped to receive tourists. Most tourists are Chinese but a fair sprinkling come from outside the country.

Since you are reading this, I can safely assume that you speak English. The Chinese have an amazing ability to learn foreign languages and English tops the list. You won't have too much trouble finding someone who can understand you. My frustration has been in trying to practise my limited Chinese. Too many people want to practise English.

You will find all sorts of accommodation from five-star to no-star. It's amazing just how little impact communism has had on the deeply ingrained Chinese desire to do business. Go north into the former Soviet Union and you will see what I mean. Booking a hotel, or even a guesthouse, can usually be done over the internet. There is an extensive network of backpacker hostels and similar accommodation, often run by Westerners.

The metro system in the big cities is modern, safe and easy to use. Place names are given in both Chinese characters and Roman (ABC) script.

Information boards and public address systems provide advice in Mandarin (official Chinese) and English. Intercity trains are modern and run on time.

The Chinese are exceedingly sociable. They are used to meeting people who don't speak their own language since China has a huge number of different languages (like Europe).

At daybreak, you will find people in the parks practising their early morning exercises (young and old) or jogging (young). In the evenings many people eat out rather than cook at home. There is a marvellous hustle and bustle. Take the usual precautions when in a big crowd. China is a fairly safe place for travellers but has its problems like everywhere else.

In other stories I talk about travelling out West in China. Things are different there. You may need a permit to visit certain places and it may be advisable to have a guide.

2 People

There are 1,300 million of them and they're all called Chinese. The European Union has a third that number. They are all called Europeans but no one expects them to be the same. We recognise that Bulgarians are different from Spanish and Italians from Danes. The same goes for China. Thirty percent of the population is officially recognised as belonging to minority groups. In Britain they would be called nations (English, Scots, Welsh). The rest of the Chinese population is classed as Han.

Don't think of the Han as being all the same. For starters, they don't all speak the same language. The Shanghai "dialect" is almost as different from the official Beijing "dialect" (Mandarin) as English is from German. The same goes for Cantonese, which sounds so different that even foreigners can tell it apart from Mandarin.

The big unifying factor is writing. Most Chinese characters do not spell out sounds. They convey meaning (like our traffic signs). As a consequence, people with totally different languages can communicate through writing. You will see Chinese handing one another writing pads. They're not asking for an address. They want the other person to write down what they are saying so they can understand.

The Chinese people not only speak different languages, they have different cultures and temperaments. Up north, they are more reserved (like Japanese and northern Europeans). People in Beijing tend to be formal but the same cannot be said for Shanghai. Down south, in the Cantonese speaking regions, they are positively effusive.

In the mountainous borderlands to the north of Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar (Burma), ethnic groups differ from one valley to the next and spill over into neighbouring countries. There is a long history of ethnic tension and hostility to the central government.

In the vast, sparsely populated western regions, the people are even more varied. Many Tibetans do not regard themselves as Chinese and the same can be said for many Muslims in Sinkiang.

3 Shanghai



It's one of the world's most dynamic cities and has been for a long time. The Europeans identified Shanghai as the place to do business and dominate China when the country was weak. It was a stronghold of the Mao Zedong communists in the early days of the revolution. Its present ambition is to surpass Singapore and Hong Kong and become the leading financial centre of the region. Shanghai is an interesting and exciting place.

The city is growing at a prodigious rate. Take a train to the outskirts and you will pass vast housing developments. People are streaming in from China's interior to join in the prosperity. Some are coming as "guest workers" and living in dormitories. Many are coming to settle and put down roots.

Old residential areas in the centre are being ripped down to make way for luxury high-rise apartments. We spoke to a young lady whose family home was recently placed under a compulsory purchase order by the Shanghai administration. Like others before them, they would receive a luxury apartment in return. Her parents planned to lease the apartment and live off the rental income.

Their experience contrasted with that of people we met in Chongqing. There the authorities were requisitioning land needed to house people displaced by the Three Gorges Dam. Owners were complaining bitterly that they were being swindled.

There is a lot of history in Shanghai. Among its ancient buildings are the Longhua Pagoda, Jade Buddha Temple and the tomb of Lu Xun. Qiboa Ancient Town and Zhujajiao Water Town are well worth a visit. I've heard both criticised as "theme parks". That may be true but it doesn't prevent them from being very good theme parks.

The Nanjing Road and Huaihai Road are famous for their fashion houses and restaurants. Walk down the former and you will get to The Bund. The latter leads to the former "French Concession".

The Bund is where the Europeans and Americans had their business houses. Today the buildings fly the Chinese flag. Interestingly, you do not see the flag flown much in China. Nor do you see many statues of political

leaders. The flags in the Bund are a proud reminder that the buildings are now firmly in Chinese hands and the days of foreign subjugation are gone.

The foreign presence in Shanghai was not entirely bad for the city. The foreigners brought prosperity and were opposed to the "Boxers" who were a conservative bunch in league with the oppressive Manchu Dynasty. When the British and French put down the "Boxer Rebellion" and sacked the Manchu imperial pleasure palace, a lot of people in Shanghai were content with the outcome, even if they didn't like the way it was achieved.

The foreigners had "Concessions" of land upon which they built small towns for their nationals. The British and American Concessions have been swallowed up by recent development but large parts of the French Concession remain untouched. Its restaurants and bars were favourite venues for young revolutionaries in the early days of communism. Perhaps that's why it is so well preserved ... I don't know.

I do, however, know something about the attractive, white-barked trees that line the boulevards of the French Concession. They are now found throughout China and widely believed to be French. That's something of a misconception. The trees are native to North America and were introduced into France two hundred years ago. France is full of them.

A piece of advice: If you buy something in one of the many antiques markets, don't let them wrap it out of sight. If they do, open the package immediately and make sure you've got the correct item. Substituting something inferior is an ancient scam and I felt very silly when I found I had fallen for it.

4 Nanjing



Nanjing was founded almost three thousand years ago and was formerly China's capital. The Nanjing Treaty of 1842, following the first of the so-called "opium wars", granted Hong Kong to Britain. The war was over the "right" of foreigners to sell opium to Chinese nationals. Imagine the Mexicans insisting on their "right" to sell drugs to Americans.

A hundred years later, the city endured the infamous Nanjing Massacre when Imperial Japanese troops slaughtered tens of thousands of civilians in an orgy of blood letting that gave the lie to the claim that they were on the Asian mainland to liberate Asians from Western colonialism.

Despite the ravages of history, much that is old and impressive still stands in Nanjing. The city's ancient defensive wall survives in huge sections. The bricks from which it is made are stamped with the manufacturer's name. You can see who made the good bricks and who made the bad.

The ancient city gates are particularly impressive. They were built on a massive scale with storage chambers for armaments and barracks for soldiers. The gates are preserved as museums with historical displays and art exhibitions.

Nanjing is renowned for its parks and huge open areas, including the Purple Mountain. That is where you will find many of the city's most important relics. These include the World Heritage Ming Dynasty tombs and many ancient shrines. The mausoleum of Sun Yat-Sen, the father of modern (republican) China, is near the Ming tombs.

The Confucius Temple is a popular destination for residents and visitors alike. The building is situated beside a small river. A picturesque bridge and floating tea houses add to the attraction.

There is a lot to see on foot in Nanjing. I like to get up early and go for a stroll. People are out and about as soon as the sun rises. It's a time to socialise and do exercises. I never cease to be impressed by the way Chinese mix with one another and with outsiders. Being sociable is deeply ingrained in the Chinese psyche. You will see young people out jogging. Older people do t'ai chi exercises or a variant of them.

The parks in Nanjing are full of people exercising in the morning. I would like to report that they are in the majority but I would be stretching the truth. Far more are hurrying to work or school. There is a sense of urgency in China these days. Some older people think it's gone too far. They pour venom on Mao with one breath and yearn for a return to a more relaxed lifestyle with the next.

I met a few old people who idolised Mao but they were in a small minority. Younger people are different. Many say his name with awe. They are proud of the new China and have been brought up to believe that it's all due to Mao with a bit of help from Sun Yat-Sen. My hero is Deng Xiaoping, who upturned Mao's crazy system and set China on the road to prosperity. When I mention him to young Chinese I get little response.

Not much survives from Mao Zedong's reign. The general standard of construction was so bad that most has been knocked down and replaced by something better. There is one notable exception in Nanjing and that is Yangtze River Bridge, built in the 1960s. It received the full publicity treatment of the age and is lavishly decorated with masterpieces of revolutionary art depicting farmers, soldiers and factory workers, clasping Mao's Little Red Book.

Nanjing is not a popular destination for overseas visitors but is well worth a visit. The city mixes the old with the new. Its shops are world class and its metro system is outstanding.

5 Huang Shan



We have all seen Chinese paintings of misty mountains with trees and temples hanging in space. It is a very old style and I used to think of it as pure fantasy. Then I went to China and was surprised to discover how close it comes to real life.

My plane descended towards Shanghai and suddenly the clouds looked very Chinese. They were the puffy sort you see in Chinese paintings. All that was lacking was a few mountains and the odd dragon.

I got a further surprise when we visited the Huang Shan Mountains. They are perpetually bathed in mist. It swirls about granite pinnacles and forms seas in deep valleys. You rarely get more than a glimpse of anything before the mist returns. Trees cling to rocks and shrines poke up on ledges. They are there one moment and gone the next.

I tried to photograph the scene and was always frustrated. Like the rainforest, the mountain is all around you. Individual elements are impressive because you know they are there. Getting them together to form a picture requires skill. The artists of antiquity developed a style that captures the spirit of the mountains. Photographers rarely achieve the same result without a lot of photoshopping (mucking around with the digital image).

Today, you can get on a train in Shanghai and be at the foot of the Huang Shan in a few hours. Cable cars speed you to the top. It was very different when I first went there twenty years ago. You had to trudge up a pilgrim path. The mountain is now equipped with tourist hotels. Twenty years ago, there was just one place to stay unless you found a monk or nun who was prepared to put you up at their place.

Going back was a bit of a disappointment but don't let me put you off. The Huang Shan are one of the great natural wonders of the world. You can put up with the crowds and the commercialisation. The scenery makes the whole thing worthwhile.

I returned last year with my wife. We took the precaution of avoiding Chinese public holidays but forgot about Korean holidays. The place was overrun with South Koreans. Over two thousand had descended on the cable car station. To add to the problem, the Chinese bureaucracy was insisting on seeing everyone's passport. The excuse was security and the alleged danger was suicide bombers. God/Buddha/Confucius knows how seeing a passport will stop people blowing themselves up. We would have waited hours if a

Chinese tour guide had not taken pity on us. He included our passports with those of his (overseas) party and we went up with them.

Once on top you have to walk. That means taking a small bag if you are staying at one of the hotels. Your other luggage can be left below in a locker. The walk to the hotels is long and if you can't manage it you should stay at the bottom. There is a lot of climbing and descending but the going is easy. The paths are worthy of an emperor. No expense was spared creating steps and walkways from blocks of granite.

If you don't want to carry your bag you can use the services of one of the many porters. These are immensely fit people of all ages who carry stuff around on poles slung across their shoulders. I was told that much of what they do could be done by vehicles but that would put an end to their jobs. The official policy is to provide work for the locals and not displace them by machines.

If you like a bit of solitude in beautiful places then stay on the mountain for at least one night. The crowds melt away towards evening and it's quite peaceful after the last cable car has gone back down. It stays that way until the first cable car arrives the next morning. Then the pressure builds up as more and more people are disgorged.

6 Grand Canal



The Grand Canal is part of an extensive system of waterways that criss-crosses eastern China and links the four major rivers. Large parts were in place during the Tang Dynasty, a thousand years ago. The ancient towns along the banks are favourite destinations for Chinese tourists but attract few visitors from overseas.

They are picturesque, historically interesting and easy to visit. You can get a travel organisation to arrange a guided tour or you can make your own arrangements.

My preference is for the latter. It's cheaper and you don't have guides breathing down your neck and taking you to places where they will receive a commission if you buy something.

My wife and I recently toured the canals in the Shanghai region. We took trains and stayed in tourist and business hotels, making our bookings on the

internet. My rudimentary knowledge of Mandarin was not needed. There's no shortage of people anxious to practise their English.

The canal towns have an aging population. The old buildings are beautiful but do not meet the standards of modernity to which most young people aspire. Rather than let them decay, many municipalities have bought up large sections and developed them for tourism. Those we saw were tasteful and preserved enough of the past to give a good impression of what the towns were once like. After the lunatic destruction of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese are at pains to preserve their cultural heritage.

A good way to see the canals is by boat. This can be done by joining the other tourists and going on a cruise. Or, you can catch one of the regular ferries and join the locals as they go about their daily lives. The latter way is far cheaper and far more interesting.

The old houses rise straight up from the sides of the canals. In some places, markets line the banks. In others, there are boat yards, potteries, distilleries and other industrial sites where old crafts are still practised. Ancient bridges span the waterways like the humps of serpents and are still in use for pedestrian traffic. You will see watergates, temples and ancient fortifications.

Don't forget to take your camera.

7 Tiger Leaping Gorge

It's in Yunnan Province, close to the border with Tibet and near the famous Yangtze bend. The locals say it's the highest gorge in the world, far exceeding the Grand Canyon. I went there with my wife and was disappointed. We joined a queue of tourists and made our way along pathways and tunnels until we reached the spot where the mythical tiger made its leap. The scenery was spectacular but scarcely record breaking.

A couple of years later I went back with a mountaineering party and changed my mind. We had a Tibetan friend with us and he was scathing of the tourist route. He said he'd show us the real thing.

I was, at the time, walking with the aid of a crutch, having injured my foot in a silly fall early in the expedition. That meant riding a pony. There were lots and their owners were keen to take people up the genuine route as opposed to the one my wife and I had been on.

It was the second time in my life that I had ridden a pony. The other was on a beach when I was small. The guys with the ponies took away my crutch and hoisted me onto one of the animals, while my friends took photographs and made jokes.

The track clung to the side of the gorge. There was no safety rail and whole sections had been ripped away by landslides. We made our way round them, struggling across scree slopes, trying not to dislodge stones.

We went higher and higher and the tourists got smaller and smaller. After a while they were no more than coloured blobs on distant pathways. The track rounded a bend and the scenery was suddenly amazing. The people below wouldn't catch a glimpse of it. I realised why I had been so disappointed on my first visit.

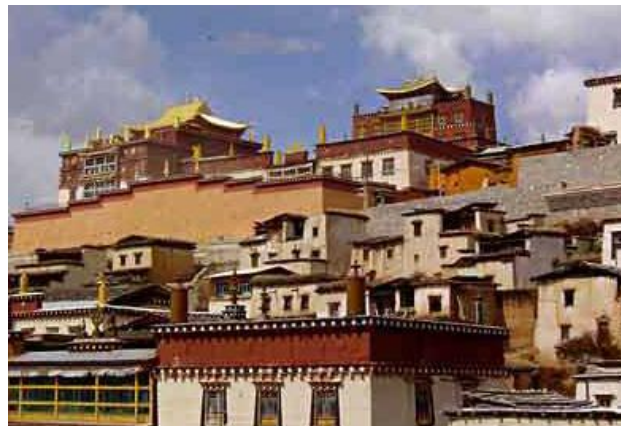
The track had been gouged into the cliff face many centuries earlier. Suddenly it narrowed and there was barely room for a man, let alone a pony. I'd been concerned for my safety on the scree slopes. Now, I was seriously worried.

I'm used to looking after myself. I like to be in control when I'm on a rock face and that wasn't happening. Just staying on the pony was difficult enough. My injured foot was throbbing and the stupid animal was lurching around. I looked for something to hang onto and there wasn't anything.

At one point, I thought my end had come. The pony spied a tuft of grass and bent over to munch it. I slid forward and found myself clinging to its neck, staring down an indescribable drop that ended in a thread of white water far below. The cliff above went on forever. I was balanced between heaven and hell on the back of a three-year-old with scant respect for heights.

If you decide to take the exciting route along the Leaping Tiger Gorge, wear climbing boots and keep well clear of ponies.

8 Shangri-La



Okay. Its real name is Zhongdian. The China Tourist Board renamed it Shangri-La for the benefit of Western tourists who have read James Hilton's novel "Lost Horizons" and want to visit a mountain utopia where they can escape the troubles of everyday life. Hilton placed his Shangri-La in Tibet. The Tourist Board located theirs over the border in Yunnan province.

I went there with a mountaineering party and injured my foot so I saw more of the town than the mountains. Apart from the discomfort, I wasn't greatly put out. There is a huge amount to see in and around Zhongdian.

The town is essentially Tibetan. Most of the people are Tibetan and the monasteries are Tibetan. We stayed in a clean and comfortable guesthouse. The facilities were basic but well up to the standard that mountaineers expect. The cost per night was a fraction of what I was charging my guests in my backpacker hostel in Australia. The guesthouse served meals and had an Internet cafe.

One of the advantages of being injured and separated from your climbing friends soon became apparent. The Tibetans take pity on climbers in distress. I soon had people inviting me to go places. One was an Internet user with a brother in a monastery. He put through a call to the monastery and arranged a visit.

His brother arrived in a shiny new car (something I'd not expected) and we drove to the monastery, which turned out to be far bigger than I had imagined. I'd seen monastic buildings on a hill, surrounded by narrow streets and old houses. I thought the houses were part of the old town. I'd not realised that they were where the monks lived. The monastery was a town within a town.

The monks wore the claret-coloured robes of their order. I'm sure there is a better word for it but I'm not good at colours. Anyway, a group of them joined us and we puffed our way up the hundreds of steps leading to the top of the hill as small boys dashed past us. The monks seemed no more able to cope with the thin air than me. I wondered if the boys would grow up to be like them if they became monks.

We reached the monastic buildings and I was treated to a private tour. The site is richly decorated with murals, ornate carvings, prayer wheels and statues. Most parts are open to visitors. You don't need a special invitation from the monks to go there.

My tour took in the monks' scriptorium and ablutions block, which is normally off-limits to visitors. While I was there, a deep roaring noise disturbed my thoughts. It sounded like air being forced down one of the drains. I inquired about it and my escort beckoned me to go outside.

We entered a private garden where some monks were blowing down gigantic bronze horns. They were several metres long and their ends rested on stands. I was invited to have a go by a monk who wiped the business end of his horn on his robe and handed it over to me. The instrument was like a gigantic bronze didgeridoo and I tackled it accordingly. My first two attempts produced no more than a weak spluttering noise. Then, to everyone's surprise, a half-passable sound emerged from the far end.

I made other trips with the monks. One was to a shrine which had been famous for its ancient stone monuments. These had been destroyed by zealous vandals during the Cultural Revolution. Fragments lay in piles, inscribed with Buddhist texts in Sanskrit. No attempt had been made to put them back together.

There's no need to have friendly monks to take you on trips. You can hire a guide and drive round the countryside. There are lots of small farms built in the traditional Tibetan style. I went to one which was open for visits. Generally I don't like this sort of thing since it can be demeaning for the locals. I didn't get that feeling in this case. The farmer and his family were as interested in me as I was in them. They had plenty of questions about life where I came from.



The top picture is of the monastery. The lower picture was taken when we were having tea with the farmer and his family.

A piece of important advice: One of my climbing mates contracted tuberculosis in Tibet. The cause was almost certainly yak's milk, which went straight from the yak into the milk jug without any processing. If you are offered tea in a remote area of China insist on having it without milk and be careful not to consume any other dairy products.

A pedantic point: My friend Kangri insists that the "yak" is the male of the species so it wasn't "yak's milk". The female is called something that sounds like "gyug". So we should be talking about gyug's milk. Kangri said he'd given up trying to get the point across to tourists.

9 Tibetans



I've met a few memorable people in my life and one was the Tibetan guy who organised the logistics for our climbing trip in the Himalayas. I injured my foot early in the proceedings and spent a lot of time with him while the rest of my party was away in the mountains. We knew him as Kangri. His parents called him by a different sounding name.

Kangri's family lived a nomadic life, grazing yaks in the highland pastures of northern Yunnan, near the Tibetan border. It's a tough way to make a living and he had some remarkable stories about his childhood.

One was a horrendous incident when he was at toddler. A lion dog took his head into its mouth. His scalp was ripped open. His mother fainted and his uncle stitched him back together again. Kangri pulled back his hair as he told the story and showed us the ugly scar that remained from the ordeal.

The Tibetan lion dogs get their name from the main of long hair on their huge heads. His family kept them to guard their herds from wolves. They lost calves to the wolves and had to be on guard for the wolf packs that followed them around. As a teenager, Kangri spent long hours with his father, lying in ambush, waiting for the packs to come within range. They had telescopic sights on their rifles but the wolves were cunning and very difficult to shoot.

When he was thirteen, Kangri went to a boarding school run by Buddhist monks. There, he learnt about strange people who lived in the West. They had yellow hair and blue eyes and didn't like the Chinese. The blue-eyed people spoke English and Kangri decided he was going to learn English.

The nearest place to do that was India. The Dalai Lama had established a college in the foothills of the Himalayas and Kangri resolved to go there. At the age of nineteen, he set off with two friends. Leaving Tibet was strictly forbidden and they had to travel at night. The journey was by foot and took over two months. Towards the end, they exhausted their money and were forced to beg.

Frontier guards patrolled the main routes. He and his friends had to use high passes to escape detection. In many places the track was no more than a crumbling ledge, cut into a cliff face centuries before. They got frostbite and couldn't feel the rocks cutting into their legs as they hugged the cliff in the dark. Kangri pulled up his trouser leg and showed us the scars he had accumulated on the journey.

The young men eventually reached India and enrolled in the Dalai Lama's college. Kangri learnt English and could have emigrated to America but felt homesick. He made enquiries and found that the Chinese authorities would let him back. In time he obtained a licence for tourist activities.

Kangri speaks Tibetan, Mandarin and excellent English. While my people were away climbing he decided to visit his family. He invited me along and we set off in his 4WD vehicle. It was an awesome trip. Kangri changed into Tibetan clothes and I put on my climbing gear to stay warm. We carried extra fuel and a box of spares.

Finding his folks required patience. Kangri talked to people en route and followed their leads. It took four days and we finally found them encamped in a shallow valley. A large herd of yaks was grazing on the surrounding hillsides. The family had ponies and two large vehicles. They clearly weren't poor. Kangri's brother was there with his wife and children; he spoke Tibetan and no other language.

The two brothers had led very different lives. Kangri was a man of the world and his brother was a herdsman whose big ambition was to visit Lhasa one day. Kangri's mother asked me if I could find a nice girl for her son. Kangri was clearly embarrassed by the question but undertook the translation.

He was now in his late twenties and clearly wanted a "nice girl". His problem was to find a Tibetan girl who shared his outlook on life. There were some "nice" farm girls but their view of the world was far too restricted. Then there were the university girls. He'd introduced me to some and made it clear that he didn't like them. I suspect that when he finds the lady of his dreams, she will be a way-out character (probably a Westerner) looking for a way-out guy like himself.

10 Tibet



The train was super modern and equipped with oxygen masks. It climbed the steady gradient through tunnels and over gorges on a track that had been completed a few months earlier. Lhasa now had a rail link with China's coastal cities. The track and the train were symbols of a nation on the move, determined to make up for lost time and join the technologically advanced world as quickly as possible.

I was travelling with my wife and we had no problem with altitude sickness. The other people in the carriage were Chinese and some were badly affected. A couple from Beijing needed medical attention and were advised to return to a lower altitude and acclimatise before proceeding further.

All of Tibet is at high altitude and getting higher. The entire region sits on the Indian tectonic plate, which was once part of Gondwanaland, together with Australia, Antarctica, Africa and South America. When this vast southern continent broke up, the Indian bit headed north at great speed (geologically speaking) and collided with Eurasia.

The undersea part of the plate ducked down and pushed its way beneath Eurasia which was uplifted to form the highland we call "Tibet". If you have difficulty visualising this process then think of a raft being pushed under another raft. The continents are like rafts drifting in a sea of molten magma.

India followed behind the undersea part of the plate and made contact with Eurasia about 45 million years ago. It was too light to go under and a bit of a mess ensued. The outcome was the range of mountains we call the Himalayas.

Most of the Tibetan people live in the "lowlands" adjacent to the Brahmaputra valley, which runs along the northern edge of the Himalayas before crossing down into India. Huge sand dunes, in the valley, date from when the land was below sea level. The Chinese are planting trees to stabilise them. A Tibetan commented to me that, since the country is continually rising, there is not much to worry about. She figured you would need an awful amount of erosion to wash Tibet into the Bay of Bengal. That's an interesting observation but unlikely to carry much weight with conservationists and people building dams.

Scarcely any part of Tibet is less than 3000 metres (10,000ft) above sea level. When you talk about "lowland" that's what you mean. The Tibetans have been in Tibet for 3000 years and have adapted to the high altitude. DNA

studies show they carry a gene that enables them to make efficient use of the depleted oxygen in the thin air.

A period of 3000 years corresponds to about 100 generations so it seems this is more than sufficient for the adaptation to occur. People who carry the favourable gene presumably have an advantage over those that don't. They raise more children and the gene spreads through the population.

The Tibetans are a light skinned people with an amazing ability to produce melanin. On a trip into the highlands with my friend Kangi, I met herdsmen with faces tanned black by the high-altitude sun. They were so dark I thought they came from southern India. Later, when we went down to a stream to wash, they displayed skin tones not much different from my European pallor. I guess this is another favourable adaptation.

The Tibetans were once fierce warriors who terrorised their neighbours with a ferocity that put them in the same league as the Mongol hordes. Then they found Buddha and adopted his teachings. Monasteries dot the land and many young men spend time as monks before joining the workforce, somewhat as other young men attend university. The picture (above) is of young monks engaged in a mid-morning debating session.

11 Lhasa



Old Lhasa is still there. The ancient shrines and old houses continue to stand beside the famous Potala Palace but the scene is changing rapidly. Modern steel and concrete buildings are sprouting up. I'm reminded of what happened to old Jerusalem.

The Chinese authorities are taking pains to preserve the physical past and the latest technology is being used to record it. Indeed, they are measuring everything with such diligence that some Tibetans fear they are planning to cut it up and cart it back to Beijing where it will be re-erected as a theme park. I discount that possibility. At the same time, I take the point about theme parks. I've seen what happened to Mont St Michel and a lot of other places that preserved their old buildings and lost their character.

Lhasa is, of course, best known for the Potala Palace. The old residential quarter is worth a visit and the markets are interesting but the palace is the real gem. It occupies a ridge above the city. There have been buildings and shrines on the site for well over a thousand years. The present complex

dates mainly from the 17th century. The palace was the Dalai Lama's winter residence until his flight to India. It is now a museum.

The upper buildings are red and are religious in much the same way as a cathedral attached to a monastery is religious. They house shrines and tombs of the lamas. The lower, white buildings are where the monks lived and worked in the old days.

Don't attempt a visit until you are acclimatised. It's easy to get off a plane and think you can cope with the altitude. The traumas start when you exert yourself. There's a big climb between the ticket booth at the entry to the palace and the Dalai Lama's suite at the top.

When we were there, a Tibetan construction crew was making repairs to one of the terraces. It looked to me like a communal effort. No modern machinery was used. There were as many women as men and everyone wore traditional dress. Baskets of mortar were carried up wooden ladders. Girls with tea earns followed behind. Older women swept back and forth in line, kneading the mortar with their feet, all the time singing. It was as if a party was going on and building things was one of the games. I have the impression it is a daily occurrence. At any rate, some friends were there six months later and saw the same thing.

The upper palace is where it starts to get interesting. The palace clings to the rock face and burrows into it. Giant statues stand in chambers lit by lamps of burning yak butter. You wonder how the building can withstand the colossal weight then realise that the statues are set into solid rock and you are inside a cave. Gongs sound, rancid smoke drifts amongst the shrines and incense fills the air. It is not difficult to feel yourself transported back to an age when the monks still worshipped there.

You climb higher and leave the gloom. Daylight streams into brightly painted rooms and illuminates fantastic images of saints and demons. They stare down at you from nooks and crannies and stand in alcoves. You press on and reach the Dalai Lama's private chambers, on the highest floor.

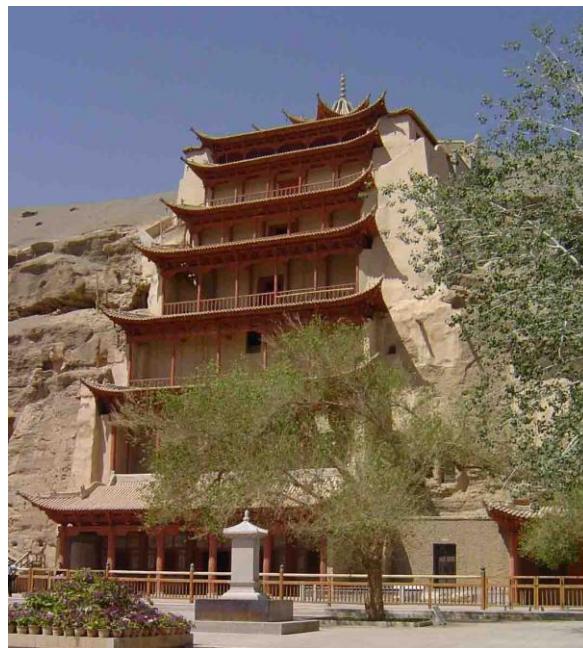
I was reminded of a visit, many years earlier, to the Pope's summer palace at Castel Gandolfo. His private quarters were not on the top floor. That honour went to the Jesuit astronomers who had a telescope on the roof. I know because I was an astronomer in those days and was there to talk astronomy. My only recollection of the meeting is of a sheet of paper that blew off a window ledge. It looped the loop before our eyes and entered the window below, much to the dismay of the Jesuits. A man returned the paper a short while later saying His Holiness recognised the writing as astronomical. Please be more careful in future.

The Dalai Lama was not in residence when I entered his chamber and there was no risk of disturbing him. His Holiness had gone to live in India and his room was now open to tourists like myself. I spent some time examining the humble furnishings. There was certainly no sign of extravagance. I recalled that he likes to refer to himself as a humble monk.

In some respects, his position is like that of a hereditary monarch. He wasn't elected to the top job. He was chosen at a very early age and raised by monks in a monastery. Unlike his peers in the Christian and Islamic churches he had no competition and no choice. He got the job and has to do his best in a very difficult position.

After I visited the palace I went to the nearby Jokhang Temple. It dates from the 7th century and houses statues of the Buddha, including the revered Jowo Sakyamuni Buddha. Pilgrims flock there from all over Tibet and beyond to perform the ritual journey of walking round the temple. I watched them for some time and recalled that my friend Kangri's mother had expressed a desire to make the pilgrimage to Lhasa before she died. Despite the modern buildings and tourist cameras, Lhasa remains one of the holiest places on Earth.

12 Silk Road



Two silk roads cross eastern China. One hugs the mountains of Tibet to the south. The other takes a northern route and skirts the mountains of Mongolia and the Tien Shan. Both routes pass through some of the most desolate and forbidding country on earth. If you like deserts then you will like the Silk Road.

The northern route is favoured by the tourist industry and this is the one I'll talk about. The southern route isn't geared for tourism and travel permits are sometimes difficult to obtain.

You can travel the northern route by bus or train. The city of Xian ... of Terracotta Warriors fame ... is a frequent starting point. Sleeping carriages are available on the trains but you'll miss the scenery if you sleep through it. The track traverses country that becomes increasingly arid. You pass through the southern corner of the Gobi then enter the Taklimakan Desert.

My preference is to cross the desert during daylight hours. Deserts fascinate me. The geology is laid bare for all to see and the people are different from city folk. That observation applies to my own country (Australia) and everywhere else I've been ... deserts are different.

In the old days, the Silk Road was the east-west highway for merchants and soldiers of the Chinese Imperial army who policed the route and manned the western extension of the Great Wall. The beast of burden was the two-

humped Bactrian camel. You can see them running wild in the desert. Failing that, you'll have no trouble finding them in tourist parks.

The old route made its way from one oasis to the next. Two of these (Dunhuang and Turpan) are of special interest. Short side-trips will be needed if you travel by train.

The tourist brochures say that Dunhuang has the biggest sand dunes in the world. I can't vouch for that but I can testify to their gigantic size. They tower up at the edge of the town. You can climb them on a camel for a small fee and make the trip back down on a sledge. After that, a gentle stroll through the dunes will take you to a Chinese temple beside a pool.

My main reason for going to Dunhuang was to visit the famous Mogao caves nearby. Many centuries ago, Buddhist monks made their homes in caves in a low cliff beside a small river. They enlarged the caves and created others. Over the years the caves became linked by wooden walkways protruding from the cliff face. Huge shrines were built within the cave system and decorated with murals.

The caves were a place of learning where the Buddhist scriptures were translated and copied onto scrolls. Many survived the misfortunes of the ages and are dispersed amongst museums around the world, including the museum at Mogao. The caves may be reached by tourist bus from Dunhuang. Facilities at the site are excellent.

Remnants of the 2000 year-old Han Dynasty Great Wall survive in the desert near Dunhuang. You will pass them on the way to join the railway line. About 80 beacon towers remain. They were used to send messages using smoke by day and flame by night.

The Turpan basin is one of the lowest points on earth ... comparable with the Dead Sea. The temperature is blisteringly hot in summer and freezing in winter. Underground and other aquifers provide water for a highly productive horticultural industry. In the old days, the City of Turpan was a major administrative centre and military post astride the Silk Road.

Impressive ruins stand to this day. The defensive walls and buildings were made of mud, compacted on a massive scale. In the dry climate of the Taklimakan, this sort of construction can survive for centuries. You can visit the ruins, which are a major archaeological and tourist site.

If you saw the film "Warriors of Heaven and Earth" and liked it then you will like Turpan. The film is set in the Tang Dynasty and gives a good idea of what Turpan was once like.

The picture (above) was taken at Mogao.

13 Urumqi



Urumqi is a city of several million people, on the Silk Road, in China's Far West. In winter, temperatures plummet to well below zero. In summer they rise into the forties (Celsius). Cars are made there and it's a major agricultural centre.

At night, freight trains speed from Urumqi towards the coast taking farming produce to Beijing, Shanghai and other cities. The extreme temperatures and abundant water supply, from the neighbouring Tien Shan Mountains, are ideal for the production of fruit and vegetables. Prosperous farming communities have lived in the region for thousands of years.

My main reason for going to Urumqi was to visit the museum that houses the famous "Urumqi mummies": also known as the "Caucasian mummies". They were excavated in desert oases along the Silk Road to the east.

Some of the mummies have been dated to four thousand years ago and have European features. They were protected from decay by the intensely dry conditions in which they were buried and are in a remarkable state of preservation. I was greatly impressed by the high standard of dying and weaving evident in their well-tailored, four-thousand-year-old clothes.

DNA studies have recently shown that the so-called "Caucasians" were not Europeans who strayed from home. They were Central Asians who carried the genes of people to their east and west, just as their descendants do today.

Urumqi is a town of many ethnic groups. The region (Sinkiang) was formerly part of the Soviet Union. Stalin gave it to China when Mao Zedong and the communists gained power. At that time, the bulk of the population was Uighur, a Moslem people who speak a language related to Turkish.

Since then, large numbers of Han Chinese have settled in Urumqi. Their part of the city is similar to the cities of eastern China. For the tourist, the

more interesting part is where the Uighurs live. You will find ancient mosques there and modern buildings with pointed arches in the Islamic style.

Many Uighurs wear Islamic dress. Some women have sombre clothing and keep their faces entirely covered. Others prefer headscarves and colourful dresses. Cloth caps and jackets, like my English grandfather wore, are popular amongst the men.

The daily street markets are well worth a visit. All manner of trades are practised in the open, just as they were in Europe a hundred years ago. Make sure you take your camera. There's a lot to be photographed but don't offend people who might not want their photograph taken. My impression was that the Uighurs are fairly relaxed in this regard ... when the photographs are taken by tourists from overseas.

I felt safe in Urumqi as a foreigner but was aware of inter-ethnic tension. Shortly after I left, it flared into communal violence.

14 Mountains of Heaven



The English name is an exact translation of the Chinese "Tien Shan". The mountains stretch for 1500 km (1000 miles) along the northern rim of the Taklimakan desert, from Urumqi in the east to Kashi in the west. They are as spectacular as the European Alps and very popular amongst Chinese skiers.

The Tien Shan are accessible from Urumqi and fleets of buses take tourists on day trips. You can join the crowds and travel on cable cars to scenic valleys with lakes and Chinese temples or you can wander down county lanes and explore Kazakh villages.

Many ethnic Kazakhs live in the Tien Shan. Some still lead a nomadic life, taking their flocks into the mountain pastures in spring and returning to the valleys in late autumn. The government has established winter campsites for them along the main roads. The sites are equipped with modern facilities and widely used.

The herds people still live in yurts, similar to those of the Mongolians to the north. These highly functional, demountable dwellings may be likened to huge baskets covered in watertight materials and insulated inside. In the past they were transported by ponies. Today, lorries are used. The yurts are snug, warm and fitted out with the essentials of modern living, including television sets.

It is a mistake to think of the herds people as poor. Some are but many families are prosperous. In a sense they are like ranchers who move around with their animals. Some have large herds and own property in the city.

Many Kazakhs live in Urumqi and work in offices and factories. In the weekends some like to head for the hills and live like grandma once did. A thriving industry has developed to cater for them. It supplies on-site yurts equipped with modern toilets, running water and electricity. Grandma would be envious.

I met one young entrepreneur and his mum (photo). The guy is well over six foot tall and towers over his diminutive mother. He speaks Kazakh, Mandarin, English and German. He translated for his proud mum who told us that she had been born in a yurt. Her son was born in hospital and attended school in Urumqi. In the space of five years he established a thriving yurt business and plans to buy a small bus for guided tours. There's a lot of business acumen in China and it's not confined to the Han Chinese.

15 Kashi



Kashi (also known as Kashgar) is where the northern and southern branches of the Silk Road come back together after they have skirted

the Taklimakan Desert. When you get there, you are almost in Central Asia. Indeed, most of the locals would say you are already there. The tribal lands of Pakistan are only a short distance to the south and Afghanistan is not much further away.

The people are Uighurs: Moslems who speak a language related to Turkish. They are the people who were accused of fermenting the ethnic violence that erupted in Urumqi two years ago.

The ancient city is relatively untouched by the wave of change that has swept over eastern China. Most houses are built in the old mud-brick fashion and have flat roofs. Modern buildings echo the architectural styles of the region with pointed arches and other Islamic features. Almost all the women wear Islamic dress and many are veiled.

The city heart is dominated by the Id Kah Mosque, which is the largest mosque in China. The impressive building dates from the 17th century and contains the tomb of the revered Abakh Khoja. The mosque is the holiest site in the region and a famous pilgrim destination.

Going to Kashi is not as straightforward as visiting other parts of China. Special permits are required and accommodation is not as plentiful as elsewhere. I have friends who made the trip as independent travellers. My wife refused to join them. We went with an organised group and stayed in one of the top hotels. I feel bound to report that the standards of hygiene were not the greatest and we had stomach upsets despite taking precautions.

Nevertheless, I found the people friendly and did not feel insecure. The culture really is different. If you want an idea of what Afghanistan is like and don't want to run the risk of going there then you might consider Kashi.

The city is located in an arid region and owes its existence to the waters that flow down from the Tien Shan (Mountains of Heaven). They are distributed through an ancient underground irrigation system that keeps the watertable near the surface.

Kashi is famous for its market. If you are planning a trip, I would strongly recommend that you time it to coincide with the farmers' market day. People flood in from the neighbouring countryside. It's a marvellous chance to see a way of life that was alive in the West until the big supermarkets came to dominate the distribution chain and dictate to producers.

If you go, you will see farmers negotiating the sale of livestock. They communicate with their hands, which they keep hidden under a cloak, and don't say a word. That way, others don't know what price was agreed. You will also see fat-tailed sheep. When they are butchered, the tails are left on so that customers will know they are buying mutton and not goat.

I took hundreds of photographs in Kashi. If you go, don't forget to take your camera.

One small tip: While most of the people are friendly, some market traders show impatience with foreigners haggling over things they don't intend to buy. Some even get angry when they won't agree to pay an extortionate price for something they want.

16 Three Gorges cruise



The lake created by the Three Gorges Dam stretches all the way to the city of Congqing in the west and this is a good place to start a cruise down the Yangtze.

Seventy years ago Chongqing was the headquarters of both Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-Shek. The two leaders stopped fighting one another and formed a shaky alliance against the Japanese. The city is far away from the coastal regions conquered by the Japanese and perpetually shrouded in mist. The Japanese bombers could rarely find Chongqing and the city was relatively safe from attack.

The mist gives Chongqing a distinctive feeling. Another distinction is the extraordinary building program launched to house people displaced by the rising waters of the dam. I have never seen so many construction cranes. Apartment blocks have sprouted up like mushrooms on land that was used for farming only a few years ago. The massive project has led to discontent and some people are not shy in expressing their anger to visitors.

Not much is left from the war years but, here and there, you will find the odd reminder. The residence of Song Qing (Sun Yat-Sen's wife) still stands and so does the residence of General Joseph (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell, who was "lent" by the Americans to the Chinese to help them fight the Japanese.

A museum of the revolution retains the atmosphere of the Mao years. Patriotic workers and peasants stand shoulder to shoulder with soldiers to forge a new destiny for the nation and fight the oppressive forces of the capitalist running dogs. It's the sort of thing that is getting increasingly hard to find. While in Chongqing, I was told of an old soldier who expressed a desire to be cremated in a Mao suit. The country was once awash with them. His dutiful relatives hunted high and low and eventually hired a tailor to have one made.

There are some magnificent World Heritage rock temples at Dazu to the west of the city. These date from the Tang Dynasty (7th to 10th Century) which is widely regarded as the golden age of Chinese culture. The statues and rock carvings are in a good state of preservation and mainly Buddhist.

The cruise boats take three or so days to make the journey down the Yangtze to the dam, visiting places of interest on the way. I'm not an enthusiast for cruises but I liked this one.

The boats usually call at Fengdu (photo, above), which has been renamed "City of Ghosts" by the tourist board. It once stood at the edge of the Yangtze. The lower part is now well below water level and protected by a dam wall. There's a lot to be seen in the sunken area but the main attractions are higher up. Ancient paths lead to temples. Some are Taoist and the

statues inside are scary. A tour guide told us that the Taoists think of hell as a place inhabited by devils who have first claim on your soul. If they judge you unworthy of their company they send you further down the line. That's an interesting twist on what I was taught at Sunday school.

A shore excursion to Shenlong Village provides a glimpse of what life was once like for the communities along the Yangtze. Until recently, boats were dragged upstream, through the rapids, by gangs of men. Many of these "boatmen" have since migrated to other parts but some remain and they have found employment in the tourist industry. Their wives have souvenir stalls and they give demonstrations of boat dragging. You get in one of their boats and they take you down a narrow gorge to Shenlong. After that, they transfer you to smaller boats and drag you up fast flowing streams.

The people of Shenlong belong to one of China's minority groups. Their ancestors used to place their dead in caves high up in the cliffs of the Shenlong gorge. Some of the coffins are visible from the boats. We were told that in ancient times the coffins were lowered down on ropes from the top of the cliffs and tended by people climbing down on ropes. Putting flowers on grandma's grave required a lot of skill in those days.

The three gorges are still impressive but not as impressive as they once were. The dam is one of the wonders of our modern age. One small tip: If you buy a fossil fish from the stalls at Shenlong (or anywhere else), don't expect it to be real. We had people on our boat comparing purchases and getting upset when they found that their fish was identical to someone else's fish. The fish were cast from moulds made from real fossils. They weren't cheated. The price they paid was entirely reasonable for what they got.

17 Sex



Guys. Bear in mind that Chinese women are relatively reserved when it comes to sex. I'm not suggesting that there is no such thing as free love in China. I'm merely trying to dampen any unrealistic expectations you might have.

If you are going to enjoy the delights of free love in China then it is most likely to be with a travelling companion with whom you started the trip or one you met on the way. I don't entirely discount the possibility of finding a Chinese chick who shares your desires. However, she'll probably want a cast-iron guarantee of marriage and relocation to the country of your birth.

You can, of course, resort to paid sex. It is certainly available and there's a fair chance you will be propositioned: particularly if you venture into certain areas. But be careful. All that glitters is not gold.

I heard of a group of young Americans who were taken to a bar by a taxi driver who said it was a top place to meet girls.

"Lambs to the slaughter."

That was how a fellow American described it. He was the owner of the backpacker hostel in Xian where they were staying. The city is famous for the Terracotta Warriors. What is not so widely known is that it is a major industrial centre with some very rough districts.

I dropped into the hostel on a social visit. If I had been on holiday by myself I would have stayed there. But I was with my wife and there was no way she would join me. We had a hostel in Australia at the time and she wanted to get well clear of the hostel scene.

The incident with the young guys happened a few days earlier. There were five of them. They had a few drinks in the bar and were propositioned by a man with photographs of young girls. The price the girls charged was low when expressed in dollars.

"Only sixteen ... very clean girls."

The guys had just left school and this was their first overseas trip. Two of them were very uneasy about the whole thing and declined the offer. The other three took it up with predictable results. It was a version of a nasty scam that I had encountered in Australia.

The girls were indeed young but far more experienced than the boys. They had hardly got started when some men in uniforms arrived and claimed to be police. They spoke surprisingly good English and alleged that the girls were underage and having sex with underage girls was a very serious crime in China. They could go to jail for years.

There was, of course, a way out and that meant handing over every item of value in their possession, including credit cards and pin numbers. Dire warnings were issued about what would happen if the numbers didn't work. The boys returned to the hostel humiliated and in bare feet. According to the hostel owner, they got off lightly. They could have been very badly beaten.

There is a misconception about China. Some people think that the country is ruled with an iron hand and there is no crime. Don't believe it. China has a law-and-order problem like everywhere else.

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