

Embracing China's historical and modern marvels

By Kathryn Reed

BEIJING – “Don't yell protest.”

That was my niece's sage advice as we walked along Tiananmen Square.

As the largest public square in the world, this mass of concrete in itself is not so impressive. Its history, of course, is what makes it seem like something more than it is.

Police officers mill about. But they have no weapons visible. Military units march in. Also weaponless. But cameras adorn many of the light standards. In a corner across the street inside the Forbidden City are riot helmets and shields lined against a wall.



Each
Terracotta
Warrior is
unique.

Photos/Kathryn
Reed

China, as the oldest continuous world civilization with records dating back 3,500 years, is a complex country.

On the one hand Beijing can boast of having one of the seven

seven-star hotels in the world – the Morgan Plaza that opened just before the 2008 Summer Olympics. On the other hand, people are using construction tools that look like they came from the 1800s.

On one corner are high-end shops like Versace and Gucci. Across the street is a traditional market where with the right person in your group silk scarves can be negotiated down to \$4.

In hotels the card key is inserted inside the room to turn on the lights. Taking the card when leaving means no wasted electricity while out of the room. Then there are many public bathrooms that require hovering and bringing your own toilet paper.

China is the world's largest energy consumer and the world's third-largest net importer of crude oil, after the United States and Japan. I would never want to drive there. Veronica says getting around on a bike is easy. Congestion is so rampant that fast-food places deliver via bicycle instead of automobile.

While hotels have wireless access, Facebook and Twitter are off-limits.

I had the opportunity to spend two weeks in China this spring. My sister, Pam, and I went to visit our niece who lives in Beijing. It was her college graduation present – which was her idea. In the process of planning our adventure we invited our mom along. Having someone speak near-fluent Mandarin and plan all of our travel inside the country made for one of the most relaxing trips I've been on.

Veronica made sure we didn't get ripped off and Pam provided the frequent flier miles for all of us. Like most vacations, you can spend lots or little. For the most part, though, China is not expensive – except for Apple products.

Land of pandas

After an initial night in Beijing we flew to Chengdu. Chengdu is in the Sichuan Province – home of incredibly, fabulous spicy food.

Veronica said watch out for that tiny numbing pepper. It was in my mouth already. Naively I asked how it got its name. She said because it will make my tongue numb. It was soon making my throat numb.

This area is one of China's agricultural regions. As the world's most populous country (1.3 billion people), not having to import all of one's food is important. However, only 13.5 percent of the land is suitable for agriculture, though 40 percent of the labor force works in agriculture.

Peppers of all shapes, sizes and heat are available. They seem to be mixed in with everything. One of my favorites was the spicy peanuts. And the mushrooms. I never got tired of the variety of mushrooms I ate throughout the country; cooked differently each time.

Hot pot is a specialty of Sichuan. It's similar to fondue in that veggies, meat and fish are cooked in a broth and everyone is sharing from the same pot.

We came to this area so I could see the pandas. Holding the little guy was definitely one of the highlights for me.

Having never been to China, everything was new and magical. And so much of what is built is to such a large scale.

The Leshan Buddha is the largest stone Buddha in the world at 233-feet tall and 92-feet across. Construction on it started in 713 AD.

Walking down the narrow stairs is worth it as you stare up at this piece of history that sits at the confluence of the Minjiang, Dadu and Qingyi rivers.

Taking a side trip, we stop off at a tea plantation. Rows of terraced plants that look like hedges grow in a bowl shaped area. Leaves are picked one by one.

Terracotta Warriors

Xi'an is the only city in China that still has a wall surrounding it. Like most cities in China, the history extends thousands of years. But what it is most famous for now is the 1974 discovery of the Terracotta Warriors.

Nearly 2,000 warriors have been unearthed. Each is life size and no two are alike. Experts believe more are buried, but new pits are not being searched for until scientists are able to find a technique to preserve the original color of the warriors.

Not having the technology of the 21st century, these soldiers have such precision and detail it's hard to believe they were created in less than two years.

Emperor Qin had them built to protect him in the afterlife. They were in the ground for 2,000 years until a farmer discovered the artifacts.

In 1979, a museum opened at the site. The structure is built around the main excavation site.

PBS had a special about the warriors that aired earlier this month.

China's capital

Beijing is huge, with more to see and do than a week allows. But, still, we felt like Veronica's itinerary allowed us to hit the highlights, with some non-traditional stops as well.

The Great Wall is aptly named. At 5,500 miles, we barely touched it. To think this was built more than 2,000 years ago is mind-boggling. Though it's not one of the original Seven

Wonders of the World, modern lists would include it.

The Forbidden City is fascinating with its lore. There are 9,999 rooms in more than 200 buildings.

The Summer Palace is definitely worth seeing.

Walking around the Olympic Park was such a contrast to having visited so many historical sites. The modern architecture of the Cube and Birds Nest are so much more impressive in person than on television.

Spending an afternoon and evening in a cooking class just for the four of us was fabulous. It's definitely not something that could be done in the U.S. because it was in the home (non-commercial) kitchen of three siblings. My stomach feels full thinking about it and I'm still wary of ever picking up a cleaver again.

Veronica found us a tea seminar through the Chinese version of Groupon. There's a lot more to tea than boiling water and putting in a bag. And fact, I don't know if tea bags exist in China. It's all loose leaves.

Street food is excellent, though I'm glad I had someone ordering for me instead of just pointing to things.

All of the food in China was wonderful – nothing like what you get in the States.

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