

## China – The Good, the Bad, and the Bizarre

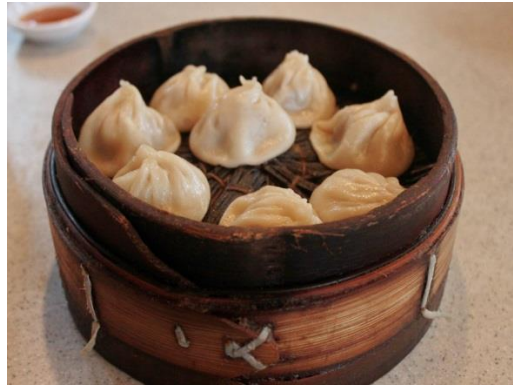
If you're anything like me, the first time you even considered moving to teach abroad, you immediately scanned the map to see all the places you could travel around the would-be destination. When I spun the globe to Thailand, the first country that caught my eye was China. It's not the closest to Thailand. It's not the cheapest country to travel to from here. And it's not too similar to Thailand, geographically or culturally. But there it sat on the map, calling my name. Just the thought of China brings all sorts of things to mind, perhaps different for every person depending on their upbringing. For me, China had almost an aura of mystique about it, and it seemed like a place I just *had* to visit if I was going to be so close. Last spring (April 2014), after living in Thailand for a year and a half and traveling all over Southeast Asia, my wife Kristin and I finally set out for a month in the great Orient. I'm sure we had all sorts of ideas of what it would be like, and I wish I could access a saved version of my memory for the humor of comparison. China immediately stood out as different from anywhere else we'd been. We loved so much there. We also found some things really frustrating, and other things just plain strange. 6 months after we left, we found ourselves back again for 3 more weeks. Clearly, China made an impact on us. It's probably the most intriguing country I've been in. This is just a little taste of traveling in China.

### The Good

#### **1. The Food!**

When you think of Chinese food, you're probably not really thinking of Chinese food. Some of the food in China slightly resembled the oily, greasy, saucy chicken dishes you get at American chinese buffets. But mostly it was very different. And I love Panda Express, but I have to say real Chinese food is *much* better. Every place we went had its own specialties, as diverse as you'd find in any country this big. My favorite was the Sichuan food, from south/southwestern China. It's nearly as spicy as Thai food, but they also use a unique variety of peppercorn that makes your lips and tongue tingle and go numb. It was a weird, freaky sensation but the food was so good I just kept chowing down and came to really enjoy the Sichuan peppercorns. Another thing I loved was all the vegetables. Greens, peppers, beans, veggies of all shapes, sizes, and colors, cooked up in some killer sauces. Most restaurants in the country have a cooler up front stocked with all sorts of fresh veggies, where you can point and choose or have them cook you up a delicious house mix, depending on how well you can decipher the menu or communicate with the cooks. Out of all the amazing foods we tried, these were my favorites:

- **Dumplings in Shanghai.** Steamed or fried – they are *AMAZING* either way, and the best are definitely in Shanghai.



- **Peking duck in Beijing.**



- **Mongolian Hotpot.** Not sure if it's actually Mongolian or Chinese...?



- **Kong Pao Chicken around Sichuan.** A favorite back home. Even better at the source.



- **Dim Sum in Hong Kong.**



## 2. EPIC sights!

I hate the overuse of the word epic. But so much of what you can see in China is just that. The Great Wall of China. The Forbidden City. The Summer Palace. Shanghai's Bund. Hong Kong's harbor. Yunnan's towering peaks. Guangxi's rice terraces and karsts. The ancient villages. The pilgrimage mountains. Wow. These are some of the most incredible places we've been. And that's just scratching the surface. Not only were these really fun spots to visit, but some of them are steeped in so much history and legend that being there feels almost surreal. One of the coolest experiences I've ever had was hiking on an original, unrestored section of the Great Wall and not seeing another person for an entire morning. And I'll never forget the sweeping vista out our window overlooking the Dragon's Backbone rice terraces, or riding a bicycle through fields full of yak near Tibet. Pictures, books, and videos can't do justice to these places. You just have to see them for yourself. But here are a few anyway.



### 3. The culture

I almost feel the best way to describe a lot of China's culture is to just say it's super Asian. English and western culture certainly hasn't permeated most of China yet to the extent it has in Southeast Asia. Most people only speak Chinese (or even just their own local language/dialect). In spite of the diverse peoples and regions, there's a pervading sense of Chinese unity that's really cool to see. And many old traditions still seem to run strongly through the fabric of their everyday lives. This was especially evident in some of the smaller villages we visited. We saw locals gathering to socialize and wash vegetables in the canals in the evenings. We rode buses in some provinces with people still wearing the traditional clothing their tribe has been wearing for centuries. In one town, we watched hundreds of people from the area come together for elaborate circle dancing every night, not as a tourist show, but just for fun.





And despite the language barrier, we met some really interesting people. Most people were quite friendly and a lot of young adults and university students were very eager to meet foreigners and practice their English. A few even invited us to travel along with them for a few days, which meant free translators/tour guides! We also got to eat a lot of meals with groups of Chinese people. A few times we ate with people in their homes, and these are some of the best travel memories I have from anywhere.

## **The Bad**

### **1. Smog**

Everywhere in eastern China, and a lot of southern China too, sits under a blanket of smog. In the countryside, the haze blocked some mountain views. In some of the cities, we could almost taste the pollution. And at its worst, like when we were in Beijing?... The layer of smog was so thick we couldn't see the sun at midday. Visibility was probably less than 1 kilometer. Buildings across the street looked hazy. Disgusting. When we hiked to a viewpoint on a mountain, we looked out and saw a distinct line of haze beneath us. I really didn't want to go back down.

### **2. Internet**

Not since before broadband internet made dial-up obsolete have I experienced such slow internet. *Everywhere!* Even in the bigger cities we weren't able to get good fast internet. It just doesn't seem to exist anywhere in the whole country. Wifi networks were few and far between. And on top of all that, a lot of sites are blocked, filtered, and/or slowed down in China. Want to search on Google? Expect to wait a minute or two for a search request to load, if it goes through at all. Want to load a map of Beijing? That should only take 10 minutes or so. Want to check in with your family on facebook? Too bad, it's blocked! Want to buy airfare online or watch a video? HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!! Although I've really enjoyed traveling in China, the internet alone (or lack thereof) is enough to make me not want to live there.

## **The Bizarre**

### **1. The Food**

Most countries I've visited have foods that I consider either a little strange, not so tasty, or even downright repulsive. China's right alongside the best of them. We had some awesome food, but we found plenty of weird stuff, too. In almost every market you'll get a nasty whiff of stinky tofu. I saw live scorpions on a stick a few times. And in Yunnan, some Chinese people invited us for some sort of hotpot meal. They didn't speak a lick of English,

so we never learned what we ate. We're pretty sure there were a variety of animal organs, and possibly some animal fur too. Ugh.

### The culture

We really did enjoy the rich culture throughout China. But there were plenty of quite bizarre aspects that caused a bit of culture shock at times. One of the weirdest things was the spitting. Chinese people spit everywhere! And anywhere! On the street, in the aisle on long bus rides, even on restaurant floors. Mealtime etiquette in general tends to be a bit strange. We were eating in a restaurant with a Chinese family we'd met, and a man in the group (wearing pajamas!) stood up, took off his shirt, chugged some unlabeled liquor, and leaned over the table to scoop some more food onto his plate. Nobody so much as batted an eye!



Another strange sight was Chinese people taking pictures of EVERYTHING. "Oh, look, a light pole! Get 20 pics of us in different poses next to it! Oh, a nondescript lamp! Look, I'm sitting in a fast food chair!" And then... they spot you... the foreigner!! They will sneak a picture when they think you're not looking. Or come up and ask if you'll pose with them. One time, we were sitting on a bench just after watching a mountain sunrise, when a crowd gathered around and gawked and took pictures like we were in a zoo. And then there are the ubiquitous tour groups. Whole roving hordes of picture-takers. Look out!



As I look back on our trips, I know I definitely won't forget China. Especially my favorite bizarro sight of all – the hilariously terrible translations you can see *everywhere!*

