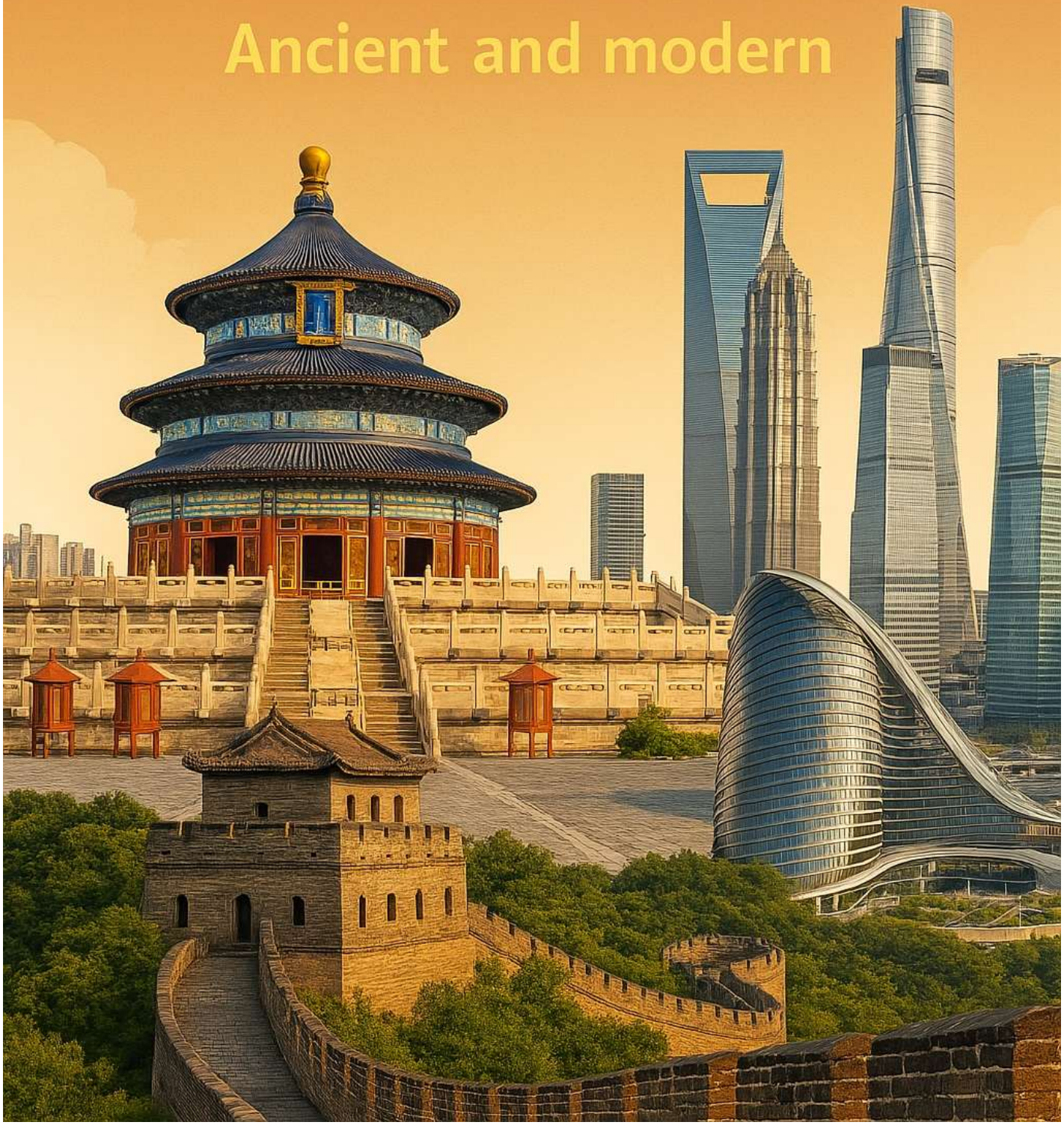
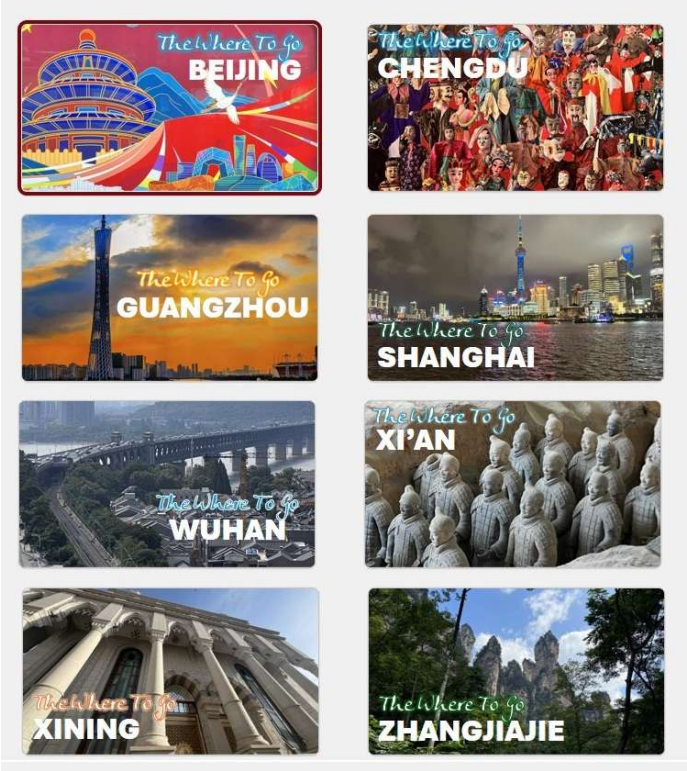
CHINA UNLOCKED

Ancient and modern



The inside cover for your information…….

China Unlocked is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the many different places visited in China on my on my website at www.TheWhereToGo.com. Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo.



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Chapter 1: The People's Republic of China

China, officially the People's Republic of China, is one of the world's most fascinating travel destinations. It is a land of rich history and vibrant culture from the ancient wonders of the Great Wall to the bustling streets of Shanghai as well as the sheer beauty of the Zhangjiajie National Park and the 3915-mile-long Yangtze River.

Then there is the Terracotta Army in Xi'an, the pandas in the Chengdu and the Forbidden City in Beijing as well as Tiananmen Square, the delightful Summer Palace and the peaceful Temple of Heaven. China spans five time zones, borders fourteen countries and is the third-largest country by total land area.

China's reputation in the international press is shaped by a combination of factors, some of which are tied to its political system, its economic influence and its role on the global stage. However, the way these factors are portrayed can sometimes lead to a rather oversimplified view, which isn't always entirely fair.

China’s lack of political freedoms and human rights and the country’s growing global influence and economic power sometimes generate tension with other nations. Other concerns including environmental issues and strict censorship laws contribute to suspicion and mistrust.

While some of the criticism may be valid and based on real concerns, media coverage often tends to focus on negative stories, as they are perceived to attract more attention. Positive aspects of China such as its rich history, cultural achievements, or progress in poverty alleviation, are underreported or overlooked.

Despite the challenges and criticisms, China has made significant strides in areas such as poverty reduction, infrastructure development and technological innovation. The press coverage often fails to acknowledge the areas where China has made significant contributions.

The following is a collation of three recent trips to China. The first trip started in Shanghai and ended in Beijing and visited. The second trip was to Tibet and Nepal via China including Beijing, Xining, Guangzhou and Wuhan. The most recent trip revisited Beijing, Xi’an and Shanghai.





The Dance of the Yao People

To get you in the mood, here is a beautiful rendition of the Dance of the Yao People performed by the Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra. The music was composed collaboratively by Liu Tieshan and Mao Yuan in 1952 and was inspired by the traditional festival music of the Yao people of southern and southwest China. You can find the music at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py-D6pikZa8

Chapter 2: Shanghai



Shanghai is the third most populated city in the world and the largest city in China with a population estimated to be around 29,211,000 and increasing. Regardless, it is not the capital city of China as this title was awarded to Beijing in 1264 by the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan.

The city is located on the southern estuary of the Yangtze River, with the Huangpu River flowing through its centre. It claims to be one of the world's major centres for finance, research, transportation, tourism, and culture. The Port of Shanghai is the busiest container port in the world.

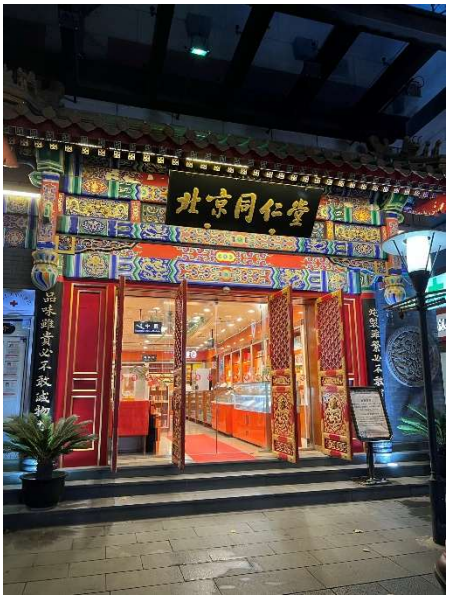
Because of the construction boom in the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai has the greatest number of Art Deco buildings in the world. It also boasts 163 skyscrapers including the Shanghai Tower which is the world's third highest building ……and only 644 feet shorter than the Burj Khalifa.













Air China



Off to China courtesy of Air China which is the flag carrier of the People's Republic of China and one of the largest airlines in China. The direct flight from London Gatwick to Shanghai take 12 hours and flies across Russian airspace. The challenges of flying across Russian territory is the reason why many other airlines are not presently flying between UK and China. The flight makes use of one of the latest airbuses, and one of my favourite aircraft, the Airbus A350. The aircraft is spacious, and the seats are comfortable for the first six hours…… after that…….

There are a broad selection of Chinese films and a small selection of English films with Chinese subtitles which are regularly interrupted by in-flight announcements. The flight attendants are very attentive, but the food leaves much to be desired. In fact, the only redeeming feature is the fact that there is a McDonald's in the arrivals lounge of Shanghai Pudong International airport. The airport here is very large and you need to fill in two large forms and provide your fingerprints to even get as far as the immigration desks where we were greeted with excessively long queues.



Let me tell you that getting into China is a lot easier than getting a visa to get into China but that is another story unless you happen to be incredibly lucky. The journey through the airport procedures can be a bit hit and miss…usually depending on the time of day. The first time was an absolute breeze and, before I knew it, I was fingerprinted, photographed and processed onto the outside world. The next time, it took well over 90 minutes and by the time we reached the other side the luggage notice had been closed, and our poor luggage had done at least 50 laps on the luggage conveyor belt and was feeling decidedly dizzy.

Maglev Train



The first thing to notice is that everything is communicated in Chinese and English although English is only available in Times Roman font size 4 so you will need to bring your glasses with you. Everywhere the locals apologise for their poor English, but their English is far better than my Chinese any day! To make up for the lost time, the trip into Shanghai was completed on the Maglev Train.

The Shanghai Maglev Train is the world's fastest operational train, with a top speed of 460 kilometres per hour (286 miles per hour) although most of our journey was undertaken at 300 kilometres per hour. The train uses electromagnets to float above the tracks thus reducing resistance and allowing for faster speeds. A single journey in the train costs 50 yuan (about £5.00) but 40 yuan if you show your plane ticket.







The Bund

The Bund, known as 'Waitan' in Chinese, is a popular waterfront area and a protected historical district in central Shanghai. It runs along the western bank of the Huangpu River and faces the modern skyscrapers of Lujiazui. The area has a distinct European flavour and is a popular destination for evening walks along the side of the riverbank.



The Bund is renowned for its striking colonial-era architecture offering a blend of historical and modern buildings which symbolise Shanghai's evolution from a colonial trading port to a global metropolis. The Bund housed major banks, trading companies and consulates from Britain, France, Germany as well as many other nations.



Along this mile long waterfront, you will find such treasures as the Customs House (1927) with its iconic clock tower, the HSBC Building (1923) which was once dubbed 'the most luxurious building between Suez and the Bering Strait. The Peace Hotel (1929) with its art deco styles stands out with its green pyramid roof and jazz-era legacy.



This is my third trip to Shanghai, and it is the 31st of December so, like most of the rest of the population of Shanghai, I am standing on the waterside awaiting the New Year celebrations. It is generally accepted that fireworks originated in China approximately 2000 years ago and the first natural "firecrackers" were bamboo stalks that when thrown in a fire, would explode with a bang because of air exploding inside them.

Naturally, China is acknowledged as the world's leading exporter of fireworks along with pretty much everything else. So, not unreasonably, you would expect that New Year's Eve would be something of pyrotechnics showcase but alas…… no. Fireworks are banned across China to curb pollution and ensure public safety. This is going to be an incredibly quiet New Year celebration.





Yuyuan Gardens



Yu Garden (or Yuyuan Garden as identified in the guidebook) is an extensive Chinese garden located next door to the City God Temple in Shanghai's Old City. The garden was built between 1559 and 1577, and the word Yuyuan can be translated as 'Garden of Peace and Comfort'.

The layout is quite extensive and mirrors classical Chinese architecture with beautiful pavilions, exquisite pagodas, dainty bridges and impressive rockeries. The gardens are peaceful even when busy with something new to look at after every turn.

Outside of the garden you will find the Yuyuan Bazaar with a great number of small streets and lanes where you can find restaurants, tea houses and numerous shops selling Chinese lanterns, decorations, silk, handicrafts and an extensive range of other tut to fill your suitcase.








Jing'an Temple



Wikipedia lists the Jing'an temple as 'an esoteric Tangmi Buddhist temple on the West Nanjing Road in Shanghai' and who am I to argue with such a detailed description. What Wikipedia does not tell you is that the word Jing'an means 'Peace and Tranquility' which is particularly fitting since the temple is a quiet sanctuary in the midst of a vibrant and noisy Shanghai district.

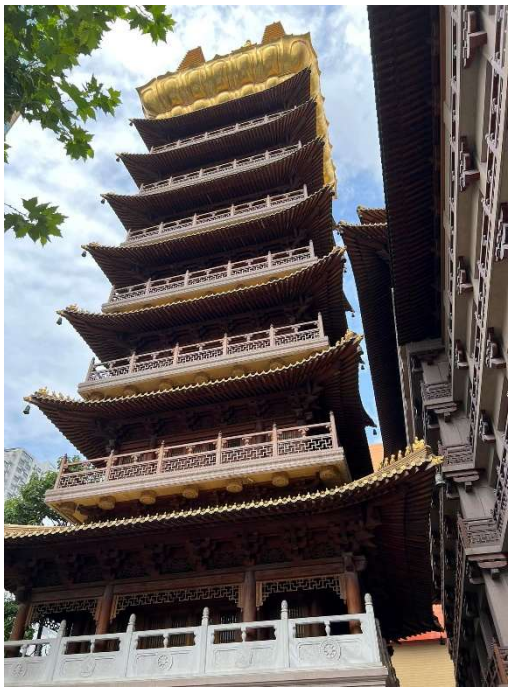
Of course, one of the best things about Shanghai is that you have no idea what is just around the corner and as I step outside, I see something that I did not expect…… an IKEA store. My closest friends and family know that I cannot possibly pass an IKEA without checking out their Swedish meatballs (with mashed potato, peas, gravy and cranberry sauce). So, I decided to venture inside and find out…

The good news is that I was not disappointed although the experience of using Chinese chopsticks to eat Swedish meatballs overlooking the Jing'an temple in not one that I shall forget for a long time to come.











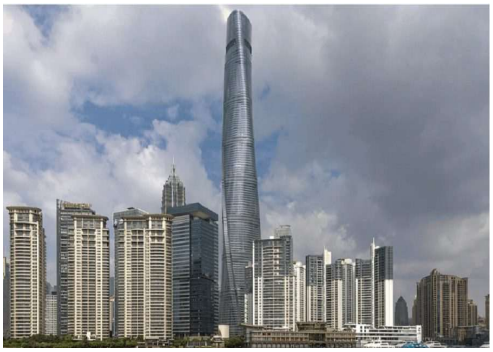


Shanghai Tower



Shanghai Tower is the tallest building in China and the world's third tallest building with 128 floors rising 632 meters. The building has the fastest elevators in the world with a top speed of 20.5 m/s equivalent to 74 km/h or 46 mph…….and very noticeable as you ascend to the observation deck on the 118th floor. From here, the view is spectacular especially since you are looking down on such landmarks as the Shanghai World Financial Tower, the Jin Mao Tower and the Oriental Pearl TV Tower.

The construction work for this building began in November 2008 was completed in August 2013. Exterior was completed in September and the building opened for public use in February 2015. The tower's twisting glass façade, completing a 120-degree twist as it rises, was intended to reduce wind loads on the building. However, it also resulted in impractical floor spaces with tenants paying for large areas of unusable space. As a result, the building suffers from an embarrassingly low occupancy rate.







China Art Museum

In my last few days in Shanghai, I thought I would spend some time enjoying the city's cultural offering including the China Art Museum. The China Art Museum, also called the China Art Palace or its original name, Shanghai Art Museum, is a museum of modern Chinese art located in Pudong, Shanghai. The museum is housed in the former China Pavilion of Expo 2010. It is one of the largest art museums in Asia. Entrance is free.







Museum of Art Pudong

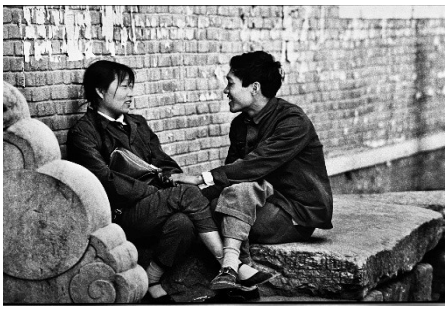


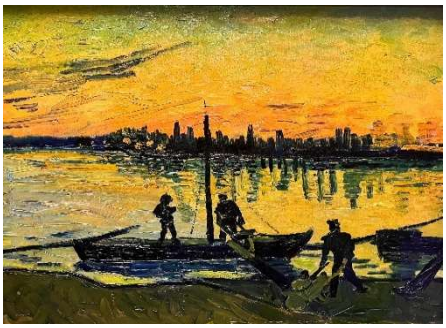
One of Shanghai's most recent additions to its cultural map is the highly acclaimed Museum of Art Pudong (MAP) which occupies a site next door to Shanghai's skyscrapers in Lujiazui on the edge of the Huangpu River.

The gallery welcomed more than 300,000 visitors within its first 100 days with an inaugural exhibition by Joan Miró alongside a display of more than 100 works loaned by our own Tate Gallery. At the time of my visit there was an excellent exhibition called 'The Greats of Six Centuries' featuring works by Canaletto, Chagall, Kandinsky, Matisse, Raphael, Rubens, Georgina O'Keeffe and Vincent Van Gogh. An accompany exhibition of photography reminds us that:

'The secret of a good photograph is timing. In photojournalism timing creates testimonies to important historical moments, yet that same sense of timing is also important in capturing typical moments of social life and individual people. A good photographer must press the shutter at exactly the right moment to capture the key point of an event.'







1933 Shanghai

1933 is a complex of restaurants and shops in Hongkou District of Shanghai. This ugly and imposing building once housed the Shanghai Municipal Council Slaughterhouse, the largest slaughterhouse in Shanghai at the time. Today it has been repurposed as a unique creative park and arts space where visitors can browse the many shops, restaurants, cafes, studios and workspaces.



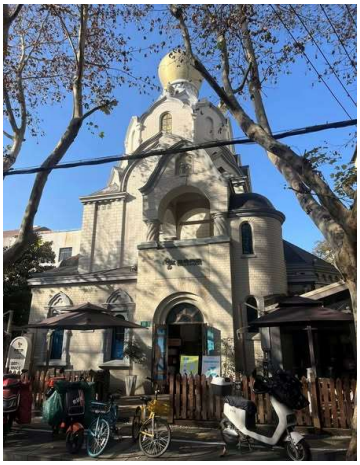



French Concession



The French Concession is a residential area of Shanghai which was once reserved for the French coming to settle in Shanghai and nicknamed the Paris of the East. The concession was established in 1862 and continued until 1943. Today the area is a popular residential area known for its cafés and tree lined avenues as well as art deco buildings and mansions. Despite much redevelopment over time, the area maintains its distinct charm and is a popular tourist attraction.





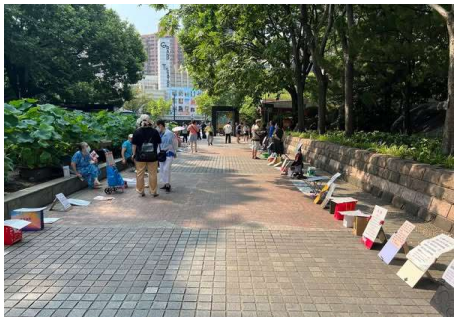

People's Square and the Shanghai Marriage Market



People's Square is a popular place for locals and tourists as well as somewhere to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. It also happens to be the home of the Shanghai Marriage Market where parents and grandparents meet to advertise their single children for marriage.

I was somewhat surprised to learn of the existence of such a marriage market given the various options available on social media. I decided to investigate further and was reliably informed that weekends were definitely the best days to conduct my research.





It is Saturday afternoon, and, to my utter surprise and amazement, this area of the park is heaving with parents, grandparents and assorted relatives advertising their unmarried relatives using handwritten, and sometimes artistically produced and laminated, posters.

The posters (thank you to my interpreter) detail personal biographies along with age, zodiac sign, weight, height, job, educational background and personal income ……but no pictures. The majority are advertisements for females with the occasional 'leftover' male!!!

The Shanghai Marriage Market has been a regular occurrence since 2004 and is as popular now as it was all those years ago. It is open every day, but most busy at weekends, especially on Saturdays because this allows the possibility of arranging for the matched pair to date on Sunday.









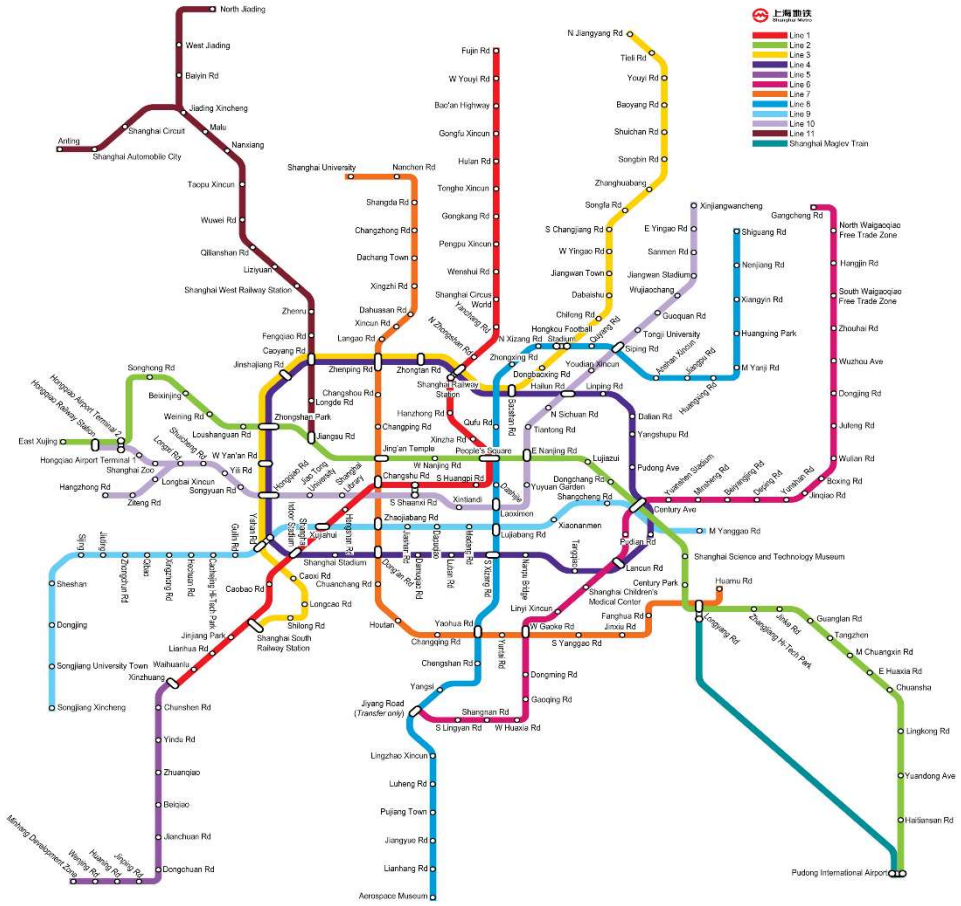
Shanghai Metro

Planning for the Shanghai Metro began in the 1980s to address Shanghai's growing transportation needs. The construction of the first line, interestingly called Line 1, started in 1990 and the line opened in 1993 covering 16 kilometres with 13 stations. The network grew exponentially over time so that the system now covers 831 kilometres with 508 stations and 20 lines.

The metro is now the world's longest metro network by route length and has done much to alleviate traffic congestion and pollution in a city of 26 million residents. I found the system particularly easy to use especially as all announcements and signage is in Chinese and English. The Chinese are very pleasant and polite so there is little pushing and shoving even around rush hour.

For your comfort, the train carriages are all air conditioned, and you even have the opportunity to choose the temperature ……cold in carriages 1 to 8 and cool in carriages 9 to 16. You can use the Shanghai Public Transportation Card (contactless payment) to use the metro and other forms of public transport….and please don't slap the door!!!





Qibao

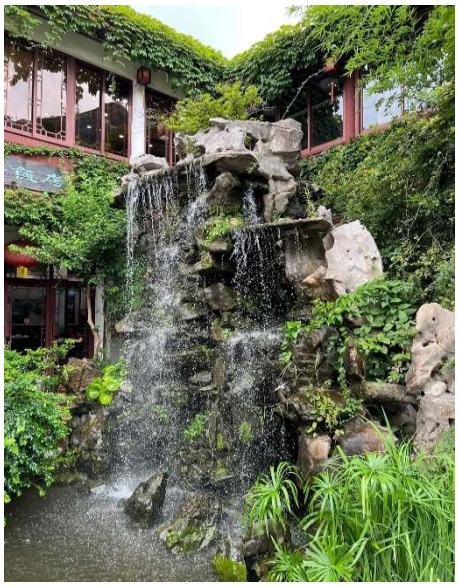
Qibao is a water town in Shanghai's suburbs consisting of two waterways lined with houses and gardens. Qibao is Chinese for 'seven treasures' with different theories on how the town got its name including one about 'seven mysteriously appearing treasures.' Unfortunately, I saw no mysterious treasures, but the town does offer an insight into traditional China with buildings that have been extensively refurbished as shops, restaurants, tea houses and craft houses.












Thames Town



Thames Town is a relatively new town, situated approximately 20 miles from the centre of Shanghai. It is named after the River Thames, and the architecture is themed to mirror Britain's towns and cities…… a good place to visit if you are feeling homesick.

The town was completed in 2006 and was built to house up to 10,000 residents. The place has a distinctive British feel about it with a variety of shops and houses ranging from Elizabethan to Edwardian. The parish church was modelled on (and looks exactly the same as) Christ Church in Bristol. The pub, the fish-and-chips shop and other buildings were modelled on similar buildings in Chester, Birmingham and Lyme Regis.

British pillar boxes, red telephones boxes and imported lampposts are scattered about town as well as a vast selection of statues depicting British personalities such as Isaac Newton, Florence Nightingale, Charles Dickens, James Watt and (even) David Beckham. There is also a canal and a market area which looks like a cross between Carnaby Street and Camden Lock.

Unfortunately, the excessive cost of these houses meant that few people moved into the area, and these have now been bought up as second homes by the rich and wealthy. The result was that many of the shops and restaurants closed resulting in the town becoming something of a ghost town ……. although, it seems, extremely popular for the purposes of wedding photographs.

Historical note: The town was originally part of China's "One City, Nine Towns" initiative which intended to build nine satellite towns to take the pressure off the overpopulated city of Shanghai. The plan was the brainchild of Shanghai's former Communist Party Secretary Huang Ju and thus had strong political backing.



Each of the towns was intended to mirror different countries including France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Holland…... and even Canada!!!!












Reflections

Shanghai is a place unlike any other. It feels modern but, at every turn, there is a hint of history and a celebration of the past. High rise towers are flanked by extensive parks featuring lakes, fountains and statues. Historical buildings are sensitively restored and repurposed where appropriate. The past and the present complement each other exceptionally well.

Shanghai is a clean place, and the popularity of electric cars does much for the outdoor environment. Litter is not a problem, and public areas are clean and tidy. Litter bins are used and organised into recyclable and non-recyclable. Public toilets exist everywhere, and they are scrupulously clean.

The Metro in Shanghai is fast and efficient. Rush hours are manageable, and the Chinese will patiently await the next train where needed. Platform signage tells you how full each carriage is so you can choose exactly where to stand for the best chance of a seat. A one-day pass is cheaper than a single between two neighbouring stations on the underground.

If shopping is your forte, then Shanghai will not disappoint with a range of shopping malls and extensive boulevards featuring all the high end shops selling luxury goods and not a sign of anything made in China…..presumably because all of the tut made in China is being shipped to our shores. Prices are approximately half of what you will pay in the UK.

And when you are tired of shopping there is plenty to visit including restaurants, museums, art galleries and exhibitions. Restaurants are hit and miss but there are many swanky places to visit and if cannot read the menu, you can always admire the pretty pictures. Cultural opportunities abound and entrance is mostly free. Where admission charges apply, there are considerable reductions for those of a pensionable age…… you know who you are!!!!

In case you are worried about the food, don't worry. Besides, some typical high-end restaurants there are lots of the usual, including Burger King, McDonald's, Starbucks, KFC and Tim Hortons. I have yet to come across any battered scorpions masquerading as something that is edible although chicken feet are a bit of a delicacy here. Dogs as pets (not food) are very prevalent across the city.

At night, the city lights up like a Christmas tree and the tempo changes as families hit the streets and workers enjoy their evenings. In parks and public spaces, women of a certain age, test out their dance routines with or without a feather fan. The musical choice would probably not make the top 100 in the UK, but it goes down very well here. Nighttime is buzzing.








Chapter 3: Zhangjiajie National Park





About five years ago, I read about a national park in China which had been the inspiration for the film Avatar. I decided that I would add it to my 'bucket list' on the basis that one day I might visit the place. My original intention was to come over in the summer of 2020 with arrangements well underway. Unfortunately, Covid put paid to my plans and after that I lost interest, not least because the country had closed its borders to tourists.

Next thing, I am looking for somewhere to visit in the long summer break, and I remember that park again. Subsequent research suggested that China had over 200 such national parks scattered across the country. However, the one that I was looking for, was the one providing the inspiration for the film Avatar, featured a glass bridge and had the highest elevator in the world.

Zhangjiajie National Park is situated in the heart of the Hunan province. It was China's first UNESCO Site and received over 80 million visitors at the last count…… most of them from China. The fact that I could book flights into Shanghai and out of Beijing meant that I could explore more of China including Chengdu and Xi'an.

So, this is where I now find myself after five years of anticipation and subject to the country opening its borders following its rigorous response to Covid. The Zhangjiajie National Park is vast and has four main entry gates, buses to travel from one place to another, cable cars to take you from one level to another and beautiful footpaths to allow you to enjoy the park and benefit from the fresh air.

I am happy to share my time at the Zhangjiajie National Park but please appreciate that the pictures and videos offered can, in no way, give a complete picture of what it is genuinely like to be here. If you ever do get the opportunity to visit the park, then come along yourself and see it with your own eyes. I hope that the following words and pictures might be enough to whet your appetite x.

Day 1: Zhangjiajie National Park Mountains

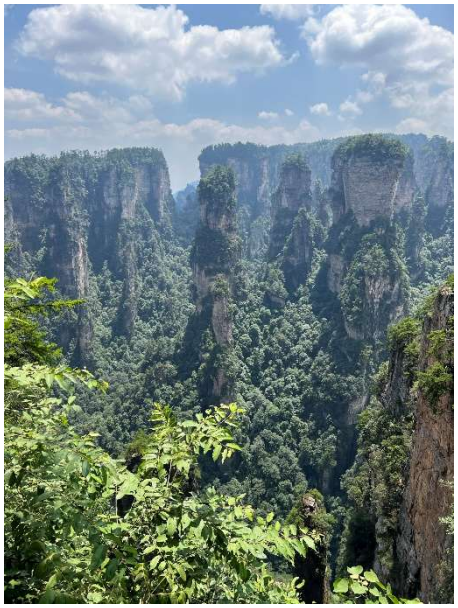
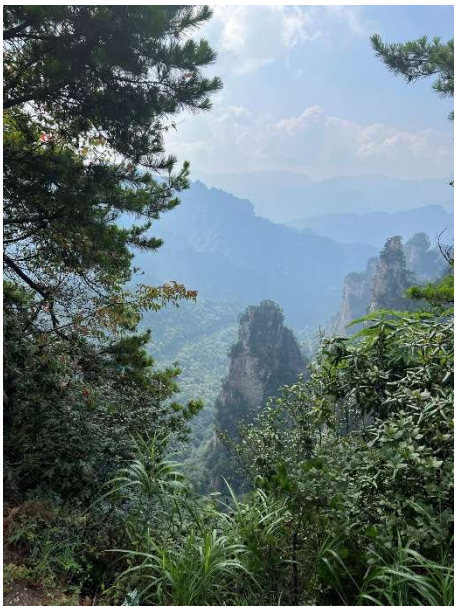


My first full day is booked out for a visit to the Zhangjiajie National Park. The hotel manager has given a plan for the day which I mostly did not understand but far too kind to say so. The hotel booked my ticket for me and all I have to do is turn up with my passport and use my face for admission purposes. No faffing around which is not a bad thing given the number of visitors.



The taxi takes me there and the driver point in a general direction which happens to be the right one. Inside the park there are three bus stops, and I have no idea which one I am supposed to join. I watch where most people are going and decide to join them then check google map to see I am going in the right direction. I am. No sooner am I getting used to the ride we are turfed off and I follow everyone else who are confidently heading towards the cable car.

Before I know it, I am on top of the world ……


Day 2: Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon Glass Bridge.



On the second day, I decide to visit the glass bridge which seems to be in a totally different place National Park than the one I visited yesterday. This time I am advised to take a bus, and I have very well versed on which one to catch with a picture of what the destination address, in Chinese style calligraphy, should look like.

The bus is pretty full, and just when you think that nobody else could possibly squeeze themselves on board, a rather loud talking woman joins the bus resplendent with what I can only describe as the contents of her house. I am now seriously wondering whether I am on a bus or a removals van. As more packing cases arrive, I decide the latter.

A couple of miles down the road and the bus comes to a sudden stop and everyone, well everyone except me, realises that we are transferring to another coach. We leave the loud woman (and the contents of a house) behind and quickly transfer to a larger and more luxurious coach complete with reclining seats.

Of course, the problem with reclining seats is that once the person in the front of the coach decides to recline, then it is very much like a domino effect ….and we must all recline. Needless to say, the rest of my journey to this particular park is undertaken in a reclining position. The world looks so difference when viewed in the horizontal position.






We arrive at the glass bridge spanning what is locally known as the Grand Canyon…… and a damn sight prettier that the other Grand Canyon. The glass bridge was the longest and tallest glass bottomed bridge in the world. The distance from the bridge to the canyon below is 984 feet which is roughly the same height as the Shard building in London.

The bridge was opened in August 2016 so the glass is quite scuffed rendering the view below as a little less scary than it would have been seven years ago. After the bridge, I took a series of escalators down to the base of the canyon to follow the five-mile scenic route through the mountains. All I can say is that I had no idea of the distance I travelled.





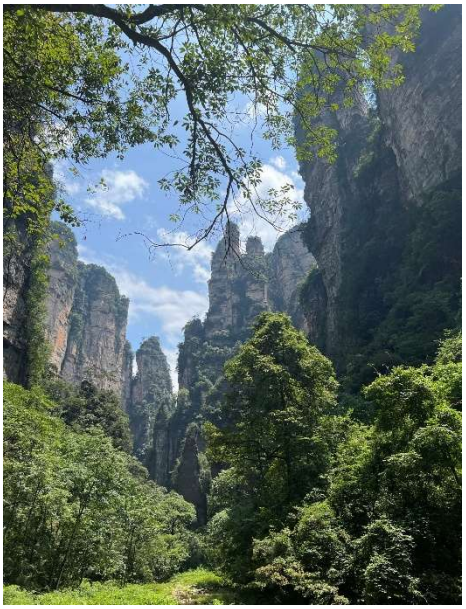
Day 3: Zhangjiajie National Park Valleys

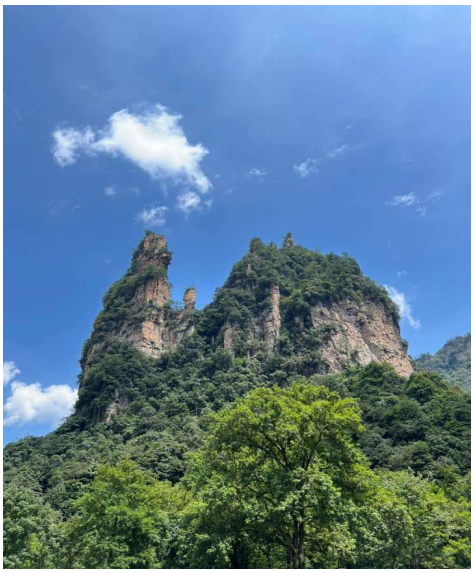


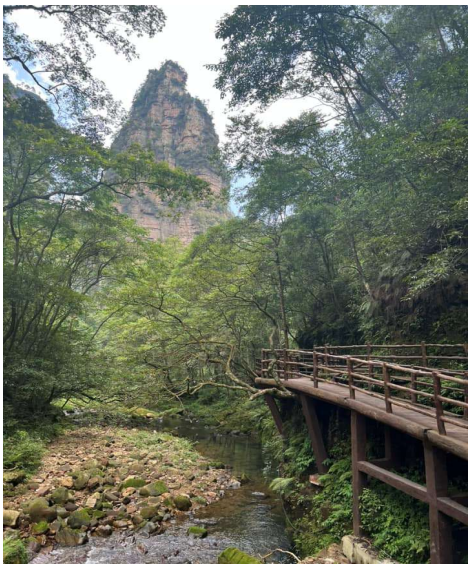
My third full day is booked out for another visit to the Zhangjiajie National Park. This time I have decided to take a walk along the valley rather than across the mountain tops. On the valley floor, the Golden Whip Stream area is a peaceful, flat trail meandering 3.5 miles east from the park entrance to the Bailong Elevator which I visited in my first day.

The Golden Whip Stream is a popular tourist attraction with the walkway taking you past waterfalls, monkeys, exotic plants and mountain peaks rising gracefully to the sky. The route is long, but the walk is shaded from the blazing sun with regular opportunities to stop and simply admire the view.









Day 4: Tianmen Mountain

My last day in Zhangjiajie and I am spending an outrageous amount of my time queuing for the Tianmen Mountain cable car which is billed as the 'longest passenger cableway of high mountains in the world' with 98 cars and a total length of 7,455 meters…….roughly the same length as the queue to get onto it. Tianmen Mountain is yet another national park within walking distance of my hotel so no worries over which bus to catch. At the top of the mountain there are loads of pathways which are well signposted as well as a chairlift which is breathtaking as you move from one peak to another. At the top of the summit there is another temple with scenic views across the town and airport ……. so nice to watch the planes taking off far below you.










Chapter 4: Chongqing



Built among mountains at the meeting point of the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers, Chongqing is unlike any other city on Earth. Often described as China's 'Mountain City', it defies conventional ideas of urban planning. Roads climb impossibly steep hillsides, bridges soar across deep river valleys, trains pass through apartment buildings and entire neighbourhoods seem to exist on multiple levels at once. It is a city where gravity appears to have been challenged, creating one of the most remarkable urban landscapes in the world.

Although largely unfamiliar to many international visitors, Chongqing is one of China's largest municipalities and home to more than 30 million people. During the Second Sino-Japanese War it served as China's wartime capital, while today it has become one of the country's fastest-growing economic and technological powerhouses. Yet beneath its futuristic skyline lies a city with a history stretching back over 3,000 years, where ancient temples, merchant guild halls and traditional neighbourhoods continue to preserve its rich cultural heritage.



People's Liberation Monument (Jiefangbei)

Standing at the heart of modern Chongqing, the People's Liberation Monument is both the symbolic centre of the city and the starting point for exploring its bustling commercial district. Originally built in 1940 as the Spirit of the Fortress Monument to commemorate China's resistance during the Second Sino-Japanese War, it was renamed after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Rising almost 92 feet (28 metres) above the surrounding streets, the monument has become one of Chongqing's most recognisable landmarks and an important gathering place for residents and visitors alike.

The monument stands in what is now Jiefangbei, literally 'Liberation Monument'. Surrounding the monument is Jiefangbei Pedestrian Street, one of western China's premier shopping and entertainment districts. Glittering skyscrapers, luxury boutiques, department stores and enormous digital advertising screens create an atmosphere that rivals Shanghai or Hong Kong, while hidden among the modern developments are traditional restaurants, teahouses and lively food streets serving Chongqing's famously spicy cuisine. The district is particularly vibrant after dark, when colourful lighting transforms the area into a dazzling display of neon and giant LED screens.





World Financial Centre – WFC Skyview



The World Financial Centre is one of Chongqing's most recognisable skyscrapers, rising 1112 feet (339 metres) above the Jiefangbei district. Its Skyview observation deck occupies the 75th to 78th floors and provides one of the best opportunities to understand just how extraordinary Chongqing's geography really is. The top floor is entirely open, so you are not even looking through glass at the scene below you.

Interestingly, the building is 1112 feet (339 metres) high but the observation deck is advertised as 1936 feet (590 metres) which refers to the elevation of the observation deck above sea level……as such, the height of the land is as significant as the height of the buildings. In fact, Chongqing now has a much taller skyscraper, but the WFC remains the highest-elevation viewpoint.

From this height, you can see the Yangtze and Jialing rivers, the densely built Yuzhong Peninsula, numerous river crossing bridges and endless ranks of high-rise buildings all competing for your attention. Not that far above you are the planes coming in to land at Chongqing Jiangbei International Airport**.** The open-air viewing area is particularly impressive because there is little to separate the visitor from the surrounding skyline.

The Skyview opened in 2017 and has become one of Chongqing's signature viewpoints. It is especially rewarding late in the day when daylight gradually gives way to the city's famous illuminated nightscape. From above, landmarks such as Jiefangbei, Hongya Cave, Raffles City and the two rivers can be picked out below.

For me, however, the real attraction is not simply the height. It is the perspective…... Chongqing's reputation as China's 'mountain city' becomes easier to understand when you look down on the streets, buildings, hills and waterways. And standing on the roof, beside a sign proclaiming '590M', provides a useful reminder that in Chongqing there is more than one way of measuring how high up you are.





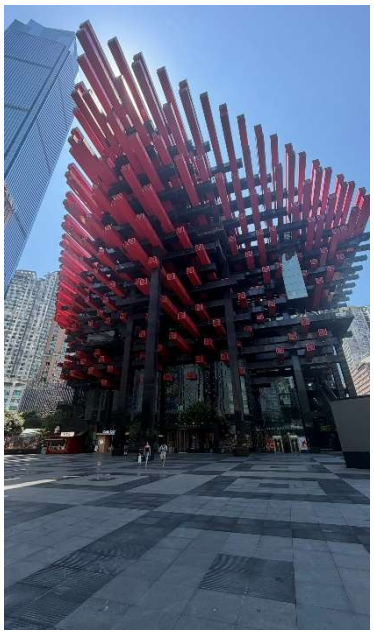










Chongqing Art Gallery

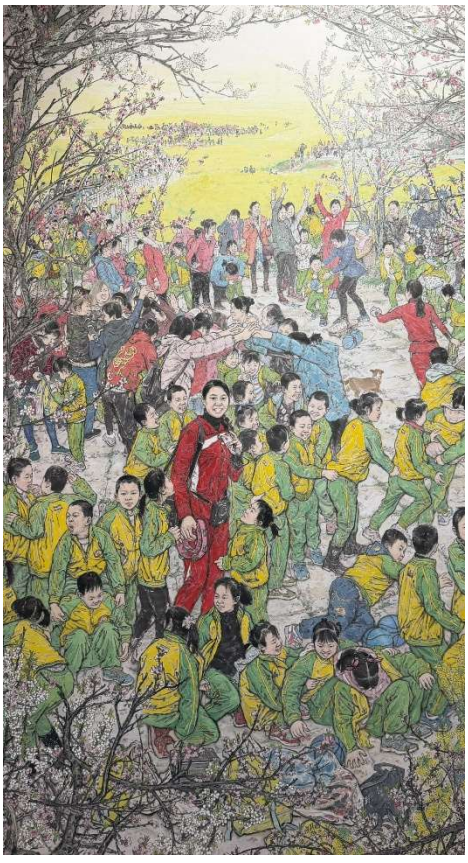
The Chongqing Art Gallery occupies a striking position close to Jiefangbei and is almost as interesting from the outside as it is from within. Opened in 2013, the building forms part of the Chongqing Guotai Arts Centre and is immediately recognisable for its unusual external framework of interwoven red and black beams.

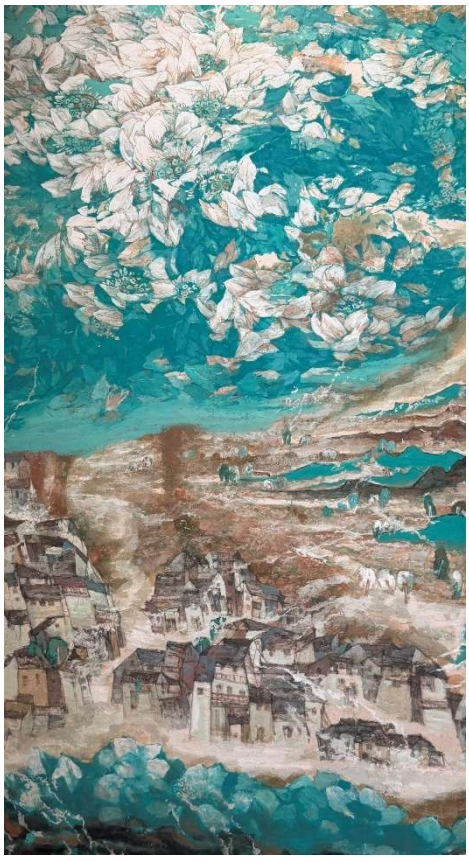
The design has produced various interpretations. Some see the projecting beams as resembling chopsticks, while others have associated them with the ingredients and visual energy of Chongqing hotpot. Whatever the original intention, the result is unmistakably Chongqing…... bold, colourful and slightly unconventional.

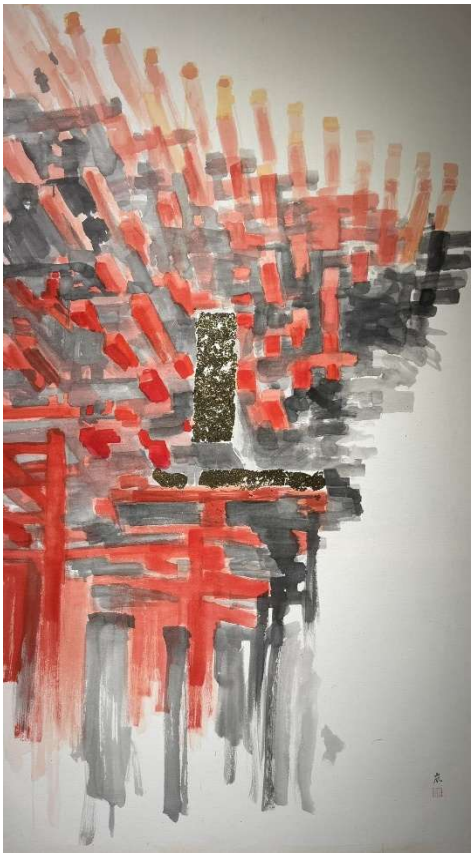
Inside, the gallery concentrates particularly on Chinese painting, printmaking and sculpture, with exhibitions that provide a useful cultural counterpoint to the city's skyscrapers and commercial attractions. It is therefore worth including even for visitors whose principal interest is architecture rather than art.











Luohan Temple (Arhat Temple)

Luohan Temple, also known as the Arhat Temple, is one of Chongqing's most remarkable survivals. Although the present complex has undergone substantial rebuilding, its origins date back to the Song dynasty, when it was established between 1064 and 1067. It was originally known as Zhiping Temple.

The temple acquired its present name during the Qing dynasty after 500 Arhat statues were installed in 1885. These figures became one of its principal features, although many were subsequently destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The temple also suffered devastating damage during Japanese bombing in 1939.

Today the temple provides a striking contrast with the commercial world immediately surrounding it. Towering office blocks and shopping centres are only a short distance away, while inside the temple the atmosphere changes abruptly to courtyards, Buddhist images and traditional architecture.















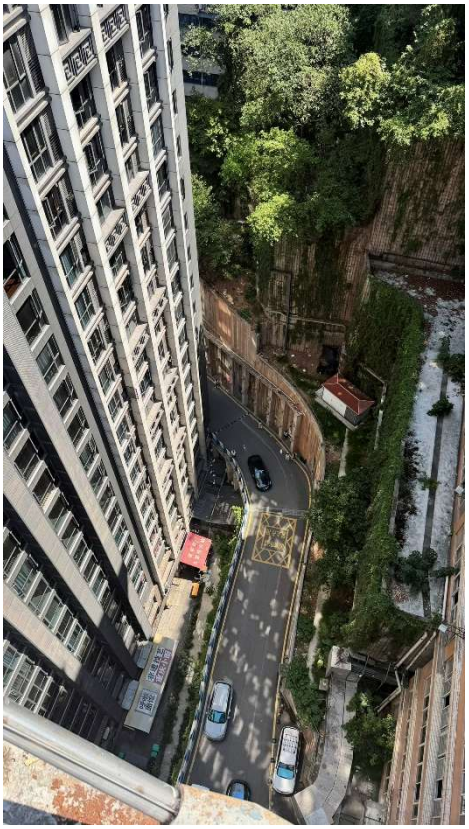


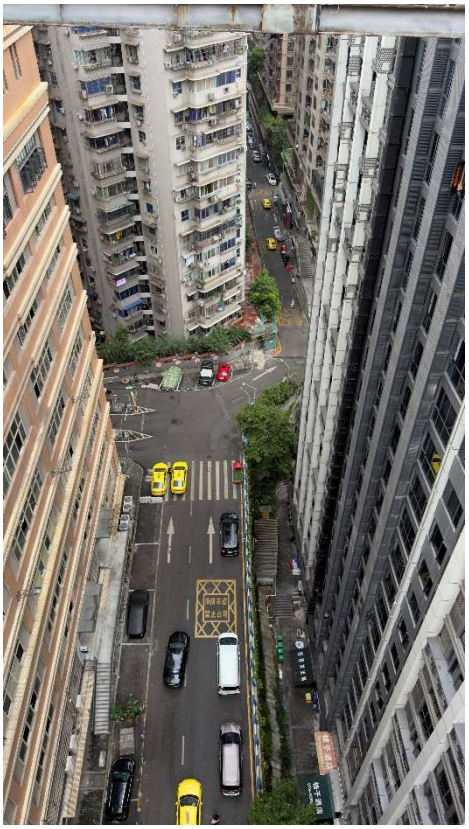

Mountain City Alley & Kuixing Building

Few places demonstrate Chongqing's extraordinary geography better than Mountain City Alley and the nearby Kuixing Building. Kuixing Building, one of Chongqing's most extraordinary architectural curiosities. One minute you are standing at, what you believe to be, street level and then you look over the railings and realise that you are 22 floors above the street level below. This astonishing illusion has become one of the city's most popular photographic locations.













Shibati (Eighteen Steps)

Shibati, meaning 'Eighteen Steps', was traditionally one of the important routes connecting the upper and lower parts of old Chongqing. The steep staircase descended through the hillside towards the lower city and riverfront, making it an important pedestrian link in a city where vertical movement has always been part of daily life.

The name does not simply refer to a modern flight of eighteen steps constructed for tourists. It comes from the historic route itself, although the precise explanation of the original count is less straightforward than the name suggests. The staircase formed part of a larger network of steep lanes and steps dating back to the Ming and Qing periods.

The original neighbourhood eventually deteriorated and was closed for extensive redevelopment. It reopened in 2021 as a reconstructed traditional-style district. This creates an important qualification for visitors: much of what appears old is actually a modern recreation of the former neighbourhood, although the project retained elements of the original landscape, routes, stonework and vegetation.

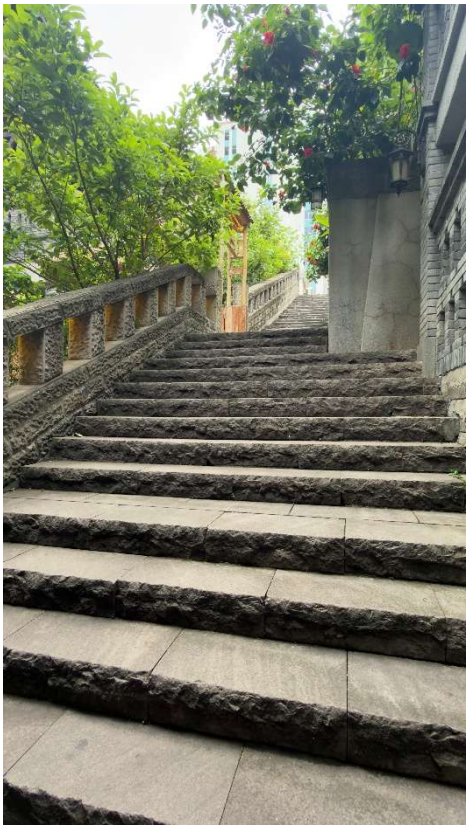
Shibati is therefore interesting both as history and as an example of how Chongqing is preserving its disappearing urban character. Its traditional-style buildings, narrow lanes and steep steps now sit beneath the city's modern towers, creating precisely the sort of contrast that makes Chongqing so visually distinctive and wonderfully different.
















Huguang Guild Hall

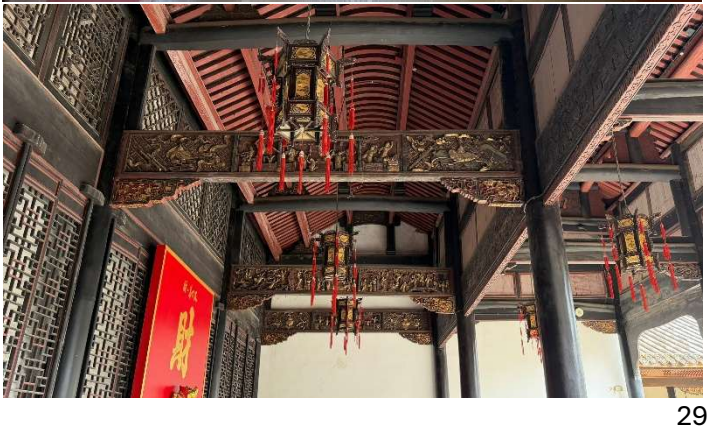
Huguang Guild Hall is one of Chongqing's most valuable links with the city's history before the modern skyscraper era. The complex was first established in 1759 during the Qing dynasty, although much of what can be seen today derives from later reconstruction. It contains courtyards, halls, theatres and associated buildings, including the Yuwang Temple and guild halls representing different communities.

During the eighteenth century, Sichuan had suffered devastating wars, famine and epidemics, and its population had fallen dramatically. The Qing government encouraged people from neighbouring provinces to migrate. The Hall provided somewhere for people from the same region to worship, conduct business, maintain social networks and preserve aspects of their cultural identity in their new surroundings.







Yangtze River Cableway

The Yangtze River Cableway is one of Chongqing's most famous forms of transport and one of the best ways to appreciate the city's geography. Opened in 1987, the cableway crosses the Yangtze between the Yuzhong Peninsula and Nan'an District, carrying passengers high above the river. The journey is remarkably short, but the views are spectacular and well worth all that stair ascending ….and subsequent descending.

As the cabin moves away from the crowded Yuzhong Peninsula, the river opens beneath it, and the layers of Chongqing's hills, bridges and skyscrapers become visible. What makes the cableway especially interesting is that it was not originally constructed as a tourist attraction. It formed part of Chongqing's public transport system, providing a practical connection across a major geographical obstacle.

The cableway is now almost a symbol of Chongqing itself. Where another city might build a bridge or tunnel, Chongqing has historically been forced to exploit every possible dimension of its terrain. The cable car provides a wonderfully simple demonstration of that ingenuity…. instead of going around the mountain or underneath the river, it simply goes over it.









Longmenhao Old Street



Perched directly opposite the glittering skyline of Yuzhong Peninsula, Longmenhao Old Street occupies an attractive position on the southern bank of the Yangtze, opposite the Yuzhong Peninsula. Its steep setting between the river and Nanshan provides a vastly different atmosphere from the dense commercial districts across the river.

The narrow stone lanes wind uphill between beautifully preserved traditional houses, restored merchant residences and elegant colonial-era villas. Many of these buildings now house independent cafés, galleries, bookshops and boutique restaurants, creating a relaxed atmosphere that contrasts with the energy of the city centre across the river.

The area has a long history, but its importance grew considerably after Chongqing was opened to foreign trade in the late nineteenth century. Longmenhao became one of the city's earliest international trading areas, and foreign diplomatic and commercial interests established themselves around the riverside district. The result was an unusual mixture of Chinese and Western influences.

Today the restored old street combines historic buildings, restaurants, cafés, shops and viewpoints with carefully maintained public spaces. It is nevertheless more than a collection of attractive façades. The hillside setting makes it possible to look across the Yangtze towards the modern skyline of Yuzhong, creating a remarkable visual dialogue between old and new Chongqing.











Raffles City Chongqing

Raffles City Chongqing is one of the most ambitious modern developments in the city. Designed by Moshe Safdie, the complex occupies the strategic site at Chaotianmen, where the Yangtze and Jialing rivers meet. It consists of eight towers, with the tallest reaching approximately 1150 feet (350 metres). The complex contains offices, residences, a hotel and a huge shopping mall.

Its most extraordinary feature is The Crystal, a 300-metre-long enclosed horizontal structure suspended high above four of the towers. It has been described as a 'horizontal skyscraper' and contains viewing areas, restaurants, leisure facilities and an exploration deck. The development's soaring towers and elevated structure were inspired in part by the sailing vessels that historically travelled Chongqing's rivers.

Raffles City sits directly beside Chaotianmen and the meeting of the two rivers, so it has become one of the defining elements of the modern Chongqing skyline. Seen from the river or from the opposite bank, the towers resemble sails rising above the water. Seen from within the city, they demonstrate how dramatically the old river port has been transformed into a twenty-first-century commercial centre.











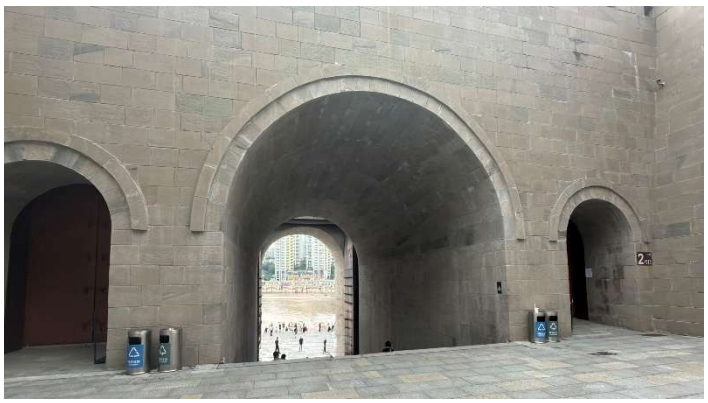


Chaotianmen Square

At the very tip of the Yuzhong Peninsula lies Chaotianmen Square, the historic heart of Chongqing and the point where the mighty Yangtze and Jialing Rivers converge. This strategic location served as the city's principal river port and gateway to southwest China. Its name, meaning 'Gate Facing Heaven', dates back to the Ming Dynasty.

For centuries, the area was associated with Chongqing's river trade. Boats arriving along the two rivers effectively entered the city here, making Chaotianmen a natural gateway between the inland waterways and the wider Yangtze system. Today the area has been transformed into an expansive public square surrounded by impressive modern architecture, yet it remains closely connected to Chongqing's maritime heritage.

Raffles City dominates the skyline, while the rivers provide a constantly changing foreground of ferries, cargo vessels, pleasure boats and smaller craft. Standing at Chaotianmen makes it possible to see the two rivers and observe the river's distinct colours, the brown coloured Yangtze and the green coloured Jialing as they merge into one.













Hongya Cave

Hongya Cave, or Hongyadong, is one of Chongqing's most photographed attractions and perhaps its most recognisable night-time image. The enormous complex clings to the hillside beside the Jialing River and consists of a series of traditional-style buildings stacked vertically above one another.

The word 'Cave' can be misleading as Hongya Cave is not a natural cave in the conventional sense. The name comes from the historic Hongya Cave area and its association with a cave-like opening in the cliffside. The area is a modern multi-level development incorporating restaurants, shops, hotels and viewing areas.

The building's dramatic vertical arrangement is particularly suited to Chongqing. Streets appear at different levels, and what looks like the top of the complex from one direction can become a lower floor when viewed from another. At night, thousands of lights transform the structure into a glowing wall above the river.













Chongqing at Night

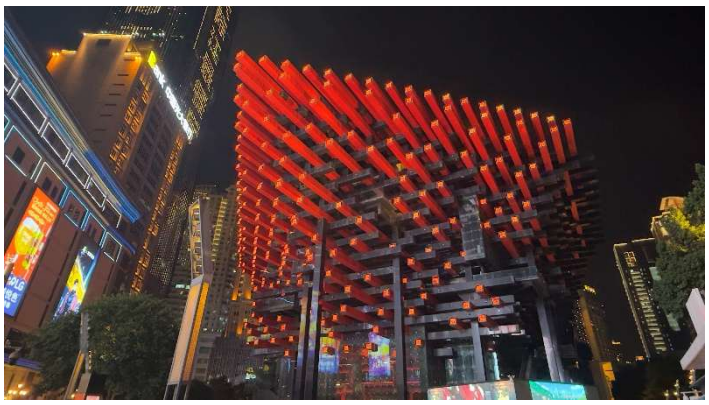
Chongqing becomes a different city after dark. During daylight, the overwhelming impression is one of hills, concrete, traffic and an extraordinary concentration of high-rise buildings. At night, the same landscape becomes almost theatrical as towers, bridges, roads and rivers are illuminated.

The city's geography is partly responsible for the effect. Buildings occupy hillsides rather than a flat plain, while the Yangtze and Jialing rivers provide dark corridors through the illuminated urban landscape. Roads climb, descend and disappear beneath buildings, and elevated railways and bridges add yet more layers.

The best-known night views include Hongya Cave, Raffles City, Chaotianmen and the riverside districts, but the spectacle is not confined to one viewpoint. From high above at WFC Skyview, the city becomes a vast illuminated landscape. From the river, the skyscrapers rise dramatically from the hills.

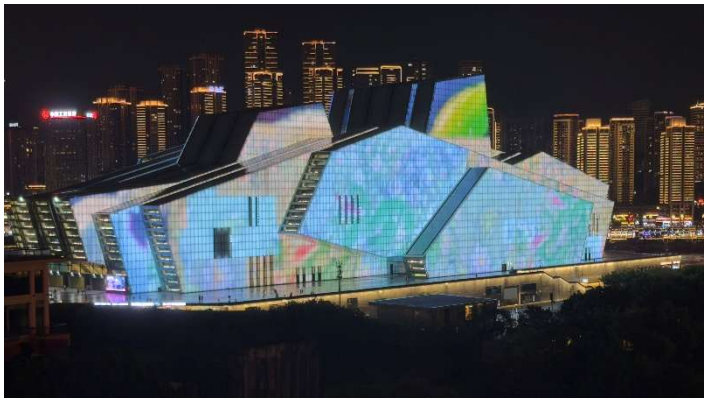
At night, the overlapping layers become even more apparent because the roads and buildings are outlined by light. The result is not simply a beautiful skyline but an urban landscape that is constantly changing according to where the observer stands.













Great Hall of the People

The Great Hall of the People is one of Chongqing's most important twentieth-century buildings and one of the city's most striking examples of monumental architecture. Construction began in 1951 and the building was completed in 1954, during the early years of the People's Republic of China. The hall was conceived as a major venue for political meetings and public gatherings, but it has also become an important cultural and performance venue.

Its design deliberately draws on traditional Chinese architecture. The enormous central dome and sweeping tiled roof are surrounded by symmetrical wings, creating an appearance that has been compared to the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. Yet beneath the traditional appearance lies a large modern structure capable of accommodating thousands of people. The surrounding People's Square was created later, particularly following Chongqing's establishment as a municipality directly under the central government in 1997.













Three Gorges Museum

The Three Gorges Museum stands opposite the Great Hall of the People and forms part of one of Chongqing's most important cultural complexes. The museum opened in 2005 and was created to record and preserve cultural material affected by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

Its collections go far beyond the Three Gorges themselves. Exhibitions cover the history of Chongqing, the ancient cultures of the region, the development of the Yangtze River and the experiences of the people who lived in areas affected by the reservoir project.

This makes the museum particularly valuable for understanding Chongqing as something more than a modern megacity. Archaeological material, paintings, historical objects and photographs help place the city within the much longer story of the Yangtze basin.

The building also works well as part of the surrounding urban landscape. From the museum and People's Square there are clear views towards the Great Hall of the People, allowing visitors to experience two vastly different expressions of Chongqing's twentieth-century history almost side by side.

For a visitor with limited time, the museum provides useful context for many of the places encountered elsewhere in the city. The rivers, migration, wartime history, traditional culture and spectacular modern development all make more sense after seeing something of the historical story behind them.







Chongqing Metro

Chongqing's metro system is an attraction in its own right because conventional ideas about urban railways do not always apply here. The city's mountainous terrain, deep valleys and tightly packed development have required engineers to build a network that frequently climbs, dives, tunnels and crosses the landscape in unusual ways.

The system now consists of numerous numbered lines and has become one of the most important ways of moving around the enormous metropolitan area. For visitors, Line 1 is particularly useful for reaching places such as Ciqikou, while Line 2 is famous for its monorail operation and provides access to central attractions including Jiefangbei and Liziba.



Line 2 is especially interesting because Chongqing uses straddle-type monorail trains rather than conventional metro trains. The line threads through the city's built-up terrain, sometimes running on elevated structures and sometimes disappearing into tunnels. It is this mixture of railway and mountain-city engineering that makes travelling on it an experience rather than simply a means of getting from A to B.

Liziba Monorail Station

Liziba is perhaps the most famous railway station in Chongqing because the Line 2 monorail appears to pass directly through a residential building. It is one of those sights that initially looks like an elaborate piece of computer-generated imagery but is, in fact, a genuine example of urban engineering. The arrangement has become one of Chongqing's most recognisable images and has attracted visitors from around the world.



The station and the residential structure were designed together, allowing the railway to occupy part of the building rather than simply demolishing it or constructing a separate route through the neighbourhood. The train therefore enters an opening in the building, stops at the station and then continues along the elevated track. A viewing area below allows photographs to be taken as the train disappears into the building.

What makes Liziba particularly interesting is that the railway is not an isolated curiosity. It demonstrates the fundamental problem faced by Chongqing's planners…... enormous numbers of people live and work in a city where available flat land is limited. Transport infrastructure has therefore had to be integrated into the existing urban fabric.













Chongqing 1949 Grand Theatre









Chongqing 1949 is a large-scale theatrical production based on the dramatic and bloody events surrounding the final days of the Chinese Civil War and the liberation of Chongqing in 1949. It is staged in a purpose-built theatre at Ciqikou and uses an unusually elaborate combination of live actors, huge sets, projections, lighting, sound and a rotating stage.

The story focuses particularly on the final period of Nationalist control and the fate of Communist prisoners held at places such as Zhazidong and Bai Mansion. These were not simply prisons. Political prisoners were interrogated, tortured and held in appalling conditions, and as Communist forces closed in on Chongqing, the Nationalist authorities began systematically executing many of those still in custody.

The killings reached their horrifying climax between 27 and 29 November 1949, immediately before the city fell. More than 300 prisoners and political activists were killed in the wider series of executions, with only a small number managing to escape. At Zhazidong, prisoners were shot inside the prison while at Bai Mansion, others were taken away in groups to be executed.

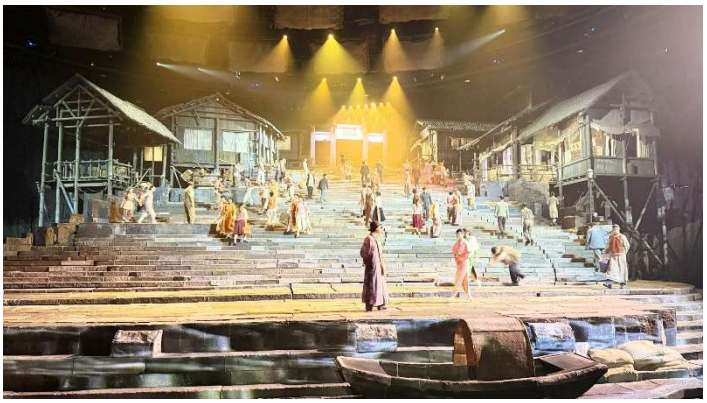
This is the historical backdrop to Chongqing 1949, and it gives the performance considerably more weight than a conventional revolutionary spectacle. The production does not dwell on the violence in a graphic or gratuitous way, but presents the prisoners' suffering, courage and final resistance as the central emotional thread. The stories of individual prisoners are woven into the much larger story of a city on the brink of political upheaval.

What makes the performance distinctive is its sheer scale. Rather than presenting history through a conventional seated drama, the entire theatre becomes part of the production. The rotating stage allows scenes to appear and disappear around the audience, while enormous sets, projections and lighting create rapid transitions between prison cells, streets and battle scenes.



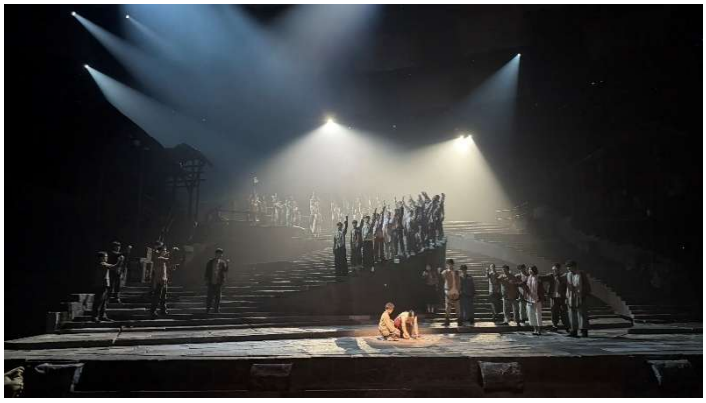
The show lasts roughly 75 minutes without an interval and is designed as an immersive spectacle rather than a restrained historical lecture. It is visually impressive, technologically sophisticated and includes some genuinely beautiful singing. You can even borrow an earpiece providing an English translation as the performance unfolds, which makes following the story considerably easier for non-Chinese speakers.

If you are coming to Chongqing, I cannot recommend this production enough. Even without understanding every word, the combination of music, acting, staging and sheer scale makes it surprisingly moving. More importantly, it offers an insight into one of the darkest episodes in Chongqing's modern history and into the way that history is presented to a contemporary Chinese audience.












Ciqikou Ancient Town

Ciqikou is one of the most popular places in Chongqing for experiencing an approximation of the city's traditional commercial streets. Situated beside the Jialing River, the settlement has a history stretching back well over a thousand years and became particularly important during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its original prosperity was intricately connected with river transport and trade.

Goods moved along the Jialing River and through the town, while local workshops and traders served the surrounding population. Ciqikou also became famous for porcelain production, giving rise to the name by which it is now known…. Porcelain Port or Porcelain Village. Ciqikou is therefore best understood as a mixture of genuine historical setting and modern restoration rather than a perfectly preserved ancient town.

The present streets contain traditional-style wooden buildings, small shops, food stalls, teahouses and craft businesses. It is busy and increasingly commercialised, particularly at peak times, but it still provides a useful impression of the narrow, pedestrian-oriented settlements that once dominated this part of China. One of the attractions is simply wandering rather than following a particular itinerary.

More than simply a tourist destination, Ciqikou preserves the architectural style, customs and traditions of old Chongqing. It provides a fascinating contrast to the city's modern skyline and offers visitors an opportunity to experience the rich cultural heritage that continues to underpin one of China's most dynamic and rapidly evolving cities.













Ring Shopping Plaza

The Ring Shopping Plaza is a hugely different proposition from Chongqing's traditional attractions. Located in Liangjiang New Area, it is a large contemporary shopping and leisure complex whose most unusual feature is an enormous indoor botanical garden. The concept is to combine retail development with nature rather than simply filling a vast enclosed building with shops.

The botanical garden contains around 300 varieties of tropical and subtropical plants and includes a spectacular 20-metre-high waterfall. The temperature and humidity are controlled to maintain the environment, creating an extraordinary contrast with the commercial spaces around it.

The Ring illustrates a newer phase of Chongqing's architectural development in which commercial projects increasingly compete through design and experience rather than simply through size. Opened in 2021, The Ring was subsequently expanded and developed as part of the city's rapidly growing northern districts. The complex confirms Chongqing's fondness for doing things on a spectacular scale.













Meiquan 22nd Century

Meiquan 22nd Century is perhaps the most controversial building in this list because it became famous not simply for its architecture, but for its striking resemblance to Zaha Hadid's Beijing Wangjing Soho complex in Beijing. The Chongqing development consists of a series of curving, futuristic forms that look remarkably similar to Zaha Hadid's project….see page 63 for the real thing!!!

The resemblance was noticed while both developments were still being constructed and prompted a very public dispute. Zaha Hadid Architects and SOHO China alleged that the Chongqing project had copied the Beijing design, while the Meiquan developers rejected the accusation and claimed that their inspiration came from the rounded stones found along the Yangtze.

Zaha Hadid Architects reportedly took legal measures, and SOHO China sent a lawyer's letter, but the matter did not result in a definitive public court judgment requiring the Chongqing building to be demolished or radically altered. Architectural copyright is particularly complicated because copyright protects original expression rather than a general architectural idea or style.

Chinese law and the practical remedies available at the time also made the case far from straightforward. The controversy remains part of the building's identity. It is an extraordinary example of Chongqing's futuristic architecture, but also an unusually clear case study in the difficult boundary between inspiration, imitation and architectural plagiarism.








Chapter 5: Chengdu and Leshan



Sad to be leaving Zhangjiajie and, secretly I guess, I am sure that I will return ……. maybe I will drag some of you along for the experience. Taxi to the airport and the place is deserted because I still have three hours before my flight to Chengdu in Sichuan, but I am not taking any chances.

The additional time was well spent trying to work out why my flight was going to Tianfu when I was expecting to arrive in Chengdu. It transpires that Chengdu Tianfu International Airport is the city's second airport which has only just recently been opened.



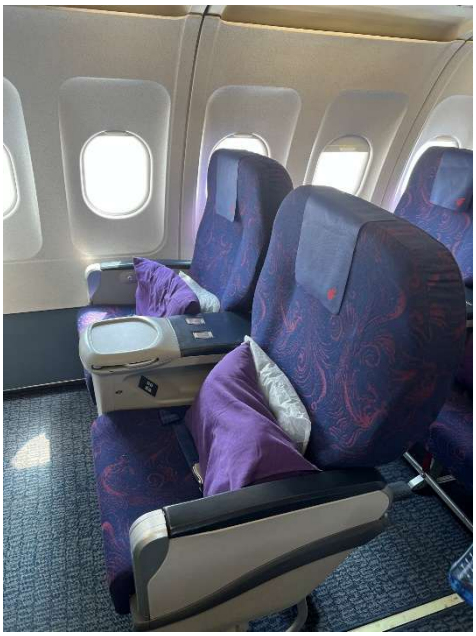
My next surprise is spotting a C919 sitting on the tarmac next to my arrival gate.

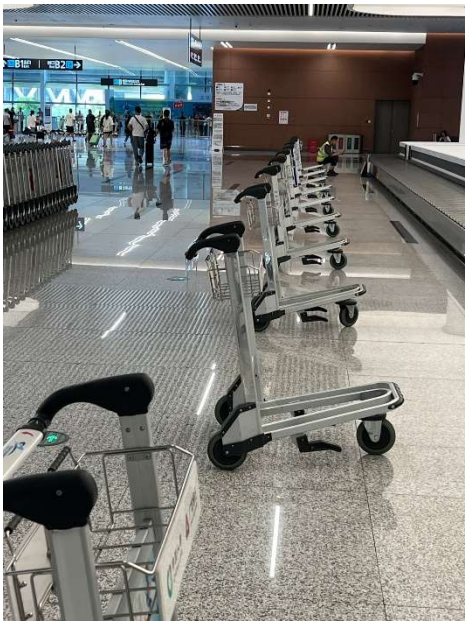
[You can miss the next bit out if you are not the slightest bit interested in aircraft and airlines].

The C919 is a narrow-body airliner developed by Chinese aircraft manufacturer Comac. The development program was launched in 2008, and the first prototype was rolled out in 2015 with its maiden flight in 2017. The C919 is intended designed to compete with Boeing's 737 and Airbus' A320.

The C919's first commercial flight was May 2023 after its certification by the Civil Aviation Administration of China. However, it could be some while before the jet is certified in the UK meaning that we are not likely to see it at a UK based airport for some time to come…… so that is why I am excited!!!!







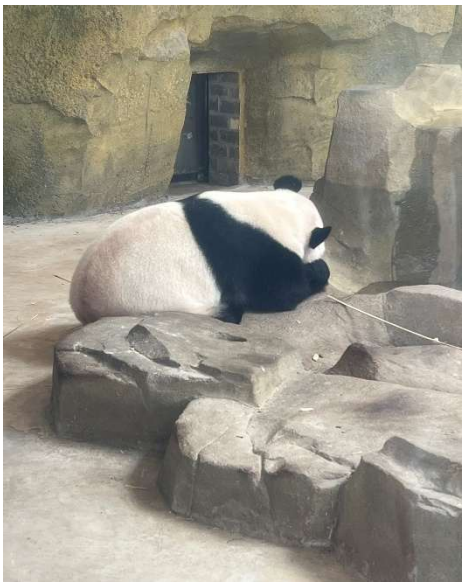
Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding.

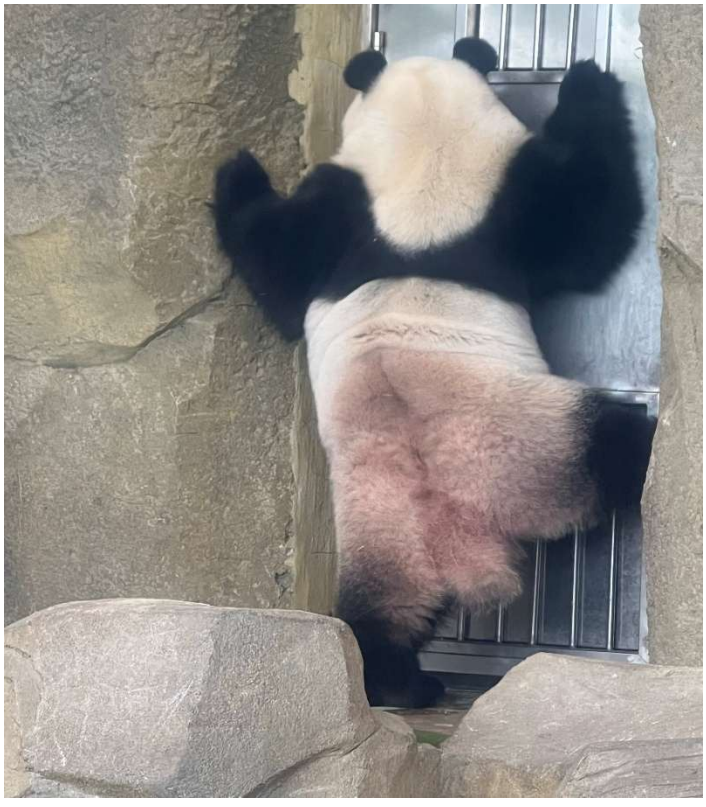
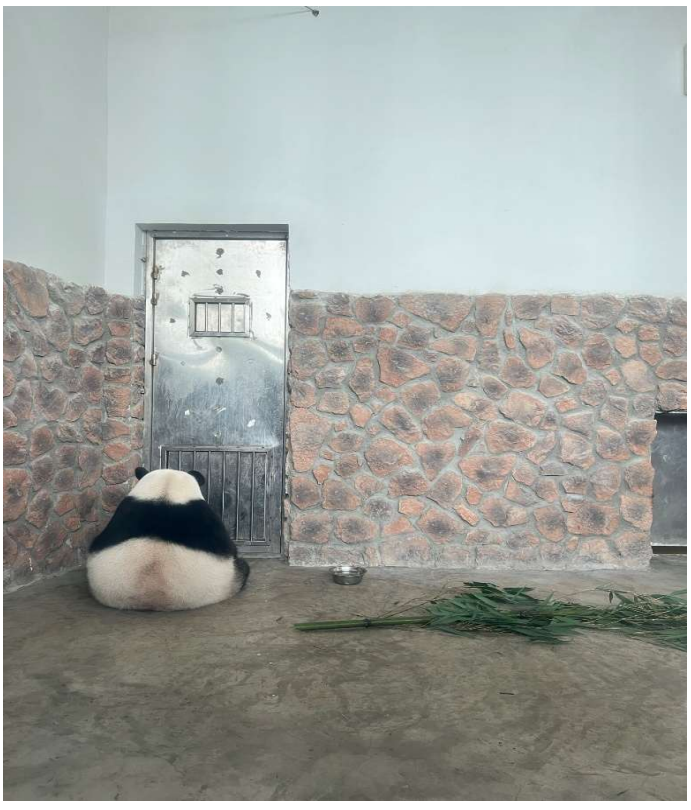
Chengdu is the home to the world-famous Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, a conservation centre famed for its breeding programme. The Research Base is a public non-profit breeding and research centre for giant pandas founded in 1987 by the Chengdu Municipal People's Government.

I think I will let the pictures speak for themselves……







Leshan Giant Buddha

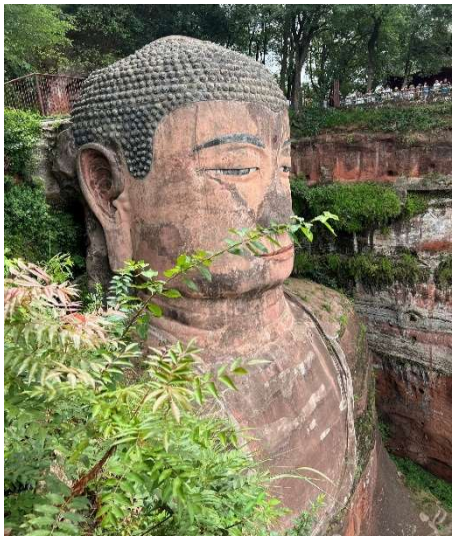


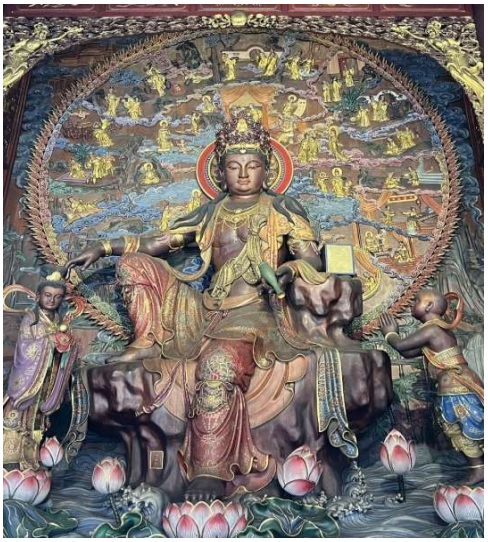


Next stop is the Leshan Giant Buddha which was once the largest statue in the world and is now the largest stone statue in the world. The statue is 233 feet (71 meters) high and overlooks the meeting point of three rivers: the Min, Qingyi, and Dadu rivers. The statue dates back to the eighth century and allegedly took 90 years to carve into the red sandstone cliff face. The site was listed as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1996.

The statue is situated some distance outside of Chengdu requiring a (high speed) train trip and a short ride to the historic site. As I could not find a bus station, I decided to take a taxi for the 7-mile trip at a cost of 28 Yuan…. that works out at 40p per mile. On top of that, my pensionable age (who would have guessed?) meant that I did not have to pay admission to the site, so the whole day seems to have been a quite reasonably priced one for me.

Prior to my arrival I seriously considered whether I was going to take the steps up to the Buddha's head. The various guidebooks suggested that this was not recommended as the stairs were steep and irregular. I duly followed the crowds and got the distinct impression that the Buddha's feet were a lot higher than I had imagined. The next thing I knew was another set of stairs to a temple type structure, opening onto a square. Ahead of me, to my complete surprise, was the Buddhas head.









Chapter 6: Xi'an

Next stop on my travels across China is Xi'an, home of the Terracotta Army or Terracotta Warriors as they are known locally. Unfortunately, I do not know much else about Xi'an, so I am going to have to do my research. On this occasion I have decided to take the train and sample the delights of the Chinese railway system.







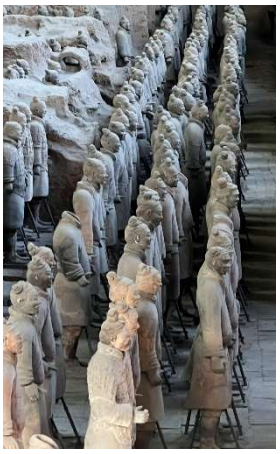
China Railways is the busiest in the world and it is almost entirely state owned by the China State Railway Group Company Limited. The country also boasts the world's largest network of high-speed railways with 23,500 miles of lines linking all the major cities (over 500 at the last count) ……. and all of them completed in the last 15 years.

Unfortunately, the China Railways booking system is presented completely in Chinese, so I had to use one of the many booking companies which was fast and efficient…… and ridiculously cheap including the first-class tickets if you want a bit more comfort. The trains are well staffed including on board cleaners and a range of food and beverages served at your seat.

All seats are reclinable (including second class seats), and all seats face the direction of travel. This is possible because seats are rotated at the end of the line prior to the return journey. The high-speed trains are a little more expensive but travelling at 300 kph (186 mph) can save a lot of time on those long-distance journeys.Time for my train…….

Xi'an Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum.

It was unfortunate that on my last visit to China, in 1996, I did not get round to visiting Xi'an to see the Terracotta Army. There are plenty of half day and full day tours, but I thought I should be able to do this by myself. The metro journey to the outskirts of the city was easy enough but I could not find a bus station for love nor money and wondered whether my journey might end here.







Nonetheless, in these circumstances, I have learnt that the best thing is to follow the crowds. These local tourists know exactly what they are doing and where they are going ……pay 50p, jump on a bus, jump off the bus, cross the road, over the hill and join the queue for the tickets and the line for the entrance. This is not rocket-science and a hell of a lot cheaper than the advertised tours.









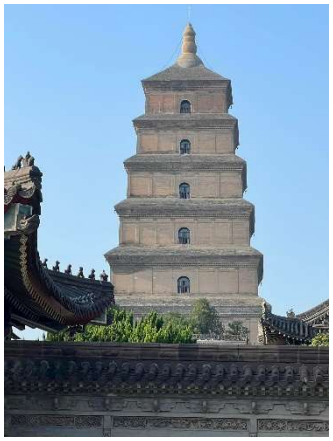
So, the Terracotta Army is a collection of terracotta statues representing the armies of Qin Shi Huang who was the first Emperor of unified China. The statues were buried with the emperor on his death (around 210 BC) to protect him in the afterlife. To date, approximately 9000 of these soldiers have been discovered and only one quarter of those are presently on display.

I really had no idea what I was going to see and the aircraft hangar building as well as the sheer numbers of (local) tourists were somewhat demeaning. However, up close these statues are utterly amazing and each one is uniquely different. The collection additionally includes 520 horses, 150 cavalry and 130 chariots spread over three excavation sites …... although the aircraft hangar site is the largest.

The warriors were originally painted in bright colours indicating their different ranks. The warriors carried real bronze weapons, and more than 40,000 weapons have been found in the partially excavated warrior pits including swords, spears, lances and arrows. Research suggests that these weapons were never used in battle but were produced specifically for burial.

The Terracotta Army was discovered in March 1974 when a local farmer uncovered some pottery fragments while digging a well. This pottery led to the discovery of the statues which came as a complete surprise since no historical records existed. To date, Emperor Qin Shi Huang's actual tomb also remains a mystery as it is still sealed up. It is widely thought that the tomb might even be booby trapped.

Giant Wild Goose Pagoda



The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of China's most iconic Buddhist monuments. The pagoda was constructed in 652 under the patronage of Emperor Gaozong to house sacred Buddhist texts brought from India. The pagoda became a repository for over 600 Sanskrit manuscripts which were subsequently translated into Chinese.

The pagoda was originally five stories high and was rebuilt to 7 stories in the 8th century. It was built with brick, which was uncommon at the time, and reflects Indian Buddhist stupa influences adapted to Chinese aesthetics. Due to centuries of earthquakes and soil subsidence, the pagoda tilts slightly by about 1.3 degrees…hardly noticeable but interesting to share with others if you wish to impress.







It is unclear how the pagoda got the name 'Wild Goose,' but legend says a flock of wild geese once fell from the sky and this was interpreted as a divine sign. Another story claims starving monks prayed for food, and a goose miraculously crashed nearby, inspiring them to build the pagoda. I am sure there will be lots of other explanations but two is enough for now.





Great Mosque of Xi'an.



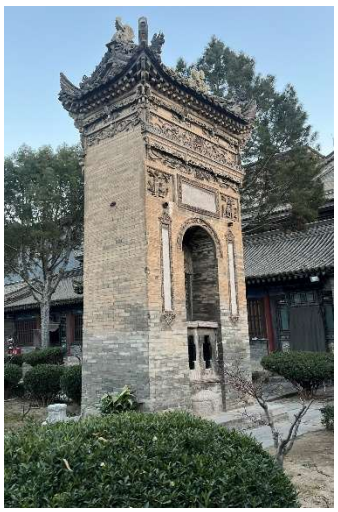
I guess I should not be surprised that there is no such thing as a Chinese Quarter in China. However, I did manage to find a Muslim Quarter in Xi'an which is a well-known tourist spot famous for its culture and its food. There are ten mosques in the area and the biggest is the Great Mosque which is listed as a 'state-level protected heritage' for its traditional buildings and religious significance. The Great Mosque dates back to 742 although most of what remains dates back to 1384. The Great Mosque is one of the oldest, largest and best-preserved Islamic mosques in China.

















Xi’an Bell Tower

Situated prominently in the very heart of Xi'an (at the intersection of its four main thoroughfares) stands the Xi'an Bell Tower, which is a magnificent wooden structure and, allegedly, one of the largest and best-preserved of its kind in China. The Bell Tower was constructed in 1384 during the Ming Dynasty and was originally situated a short distance from its present location.



The Bell Tower was relocated to its present position in 1582 as the new position represented the very centre of the city. The square-based structure, made of wood and glazed tiles, once housed a massive iron bell which was rung at dawn to mark the start of the day and served as the city's timekeeper. Today, the bell is silenced but the tower's presence remains as potent as ever.





Xi’an Drum Tower

The Xi'an Drum Tower is located a short walk west of the Bell Tower and formed the other half of the timekeeping heart of the old Ming Dynasty capital. While the Bell Tower was active at dawn, the Drum Tower governed the dusk with its thunderous drumbeats echoing each evening to signal the closing of the city gates and the start of the curfew.

Constructed in 1380, just four years earlier than the Bell Tower, the tower is built on a massive rectangular brick base, pierced by a north-south passageway that once allowed traffic to pass beneath. Its two-story wooden pavilion presents a slightly different, yet equally grand, silhouette against the Xi'an skyline. Today, the Drum Tower is home to a spectacular collection of drums and a spectacular view across the city.













Chapter 7: Beijing and Dalian

The journey from Xi'an to Beijing takes five hours on the high-speed train which will give you a sense of the distance between these two major cities. It is late when I arrive in Beijing, I have been sat down for the last five hours, and I am in no mood for resting. Beijing night life is hectic with shops open, restaurants full and the streets teeming with locals as well as tourists enjoying their holidays.



Beijing's history stretches back over 3000 years, and for most of the past 800 years it has been China's capital. It rose to prominence under the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th century when Kublai Khan made it his seat of power. The Ming Dynasty later rebuilt the city on a grand scale, leaving behind landmarks such as the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven and much of the Great Wall near Beijing.

In the 20th century, it became the stage for China's political transformation and home to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Beijing embodies both China's history and its future. It is the political, cultural and educational centre of the country. Few cities combine ancient imperial architecture with innovative modern design so seamlessly.

One minute you are wandering down narrow alleyways looking at traditional courtyard homes, and the next minute you are inside a futuristic metro station or walking down a skyscraper-lined boulevard. Symbolically, Beijing is the heart of China's identity and governance. For visitors, Beijing offers the clearest window into China's past, present and ambitions for the future……all concentrated in one unforgettable place.









Tiananmen Square

Tiananmen Square is situated in the centre of Beijing and contains the Monument to the Peoples Heroes, the National Museum of China and the Chairman Mao Memorial which is the final resting place of Mao Tse-Tung who is now commonly referred to as Mao Zedong.

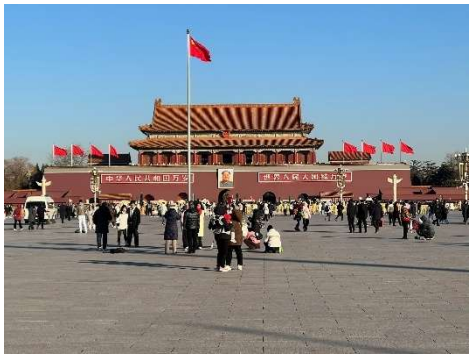
When he died, he asked that he be cremated but his wishes were overturned, and his embalmed corpse is on public display within this building every day of the week except Monday …. absolutely not on my to do list so no photographs on this page ……although plenty on the internet.

The square takes its name from the stone Tiananmen (meaning Gate of Heavenly Peace) which was the gate to the Forbidden Palace. Outside of China, the square is better known for the Tiananmen Square protests or Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 …..depending on which account you prefer to believe.

Sufficient to say there is enough written about this matter if you wish to research further. Either way, that lone student standing defiantly in front of a row of Chinese army tanks is a memory that was vividly rekindled today as I stood in the centre of Tiananmen Square.

I don't know what happened to that young man with his clean white shirt and his shopping bags. Some reports say he was executed by a firing squad a short while after the protests. Other reports say he was helped to escape to Taiwan where he lives avoiding the limelight.

His identity and his fate remain a mystery but today, in that square, I was thinking of him.





Forbidden City



The Forbidden City is situated next door to Tiananmen Square and was completed in 1420. The area was home to 24 emperors, their families, servants, concubines and miscellaneous eunuchs during the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. This is the place where the emperors governed China and illegal entry meant immediate death.

In 1908, when the Guangxu Emperor died without an heir, Empress Dowager Cixi (see my comments on the Summer Palace) picked his nephew Puyi to succeed him as the Xuantong Emperor. Puyi was forced to abdicate in 1912 and thus ended two millennia of imperial role and the establishment of the Republic of China.

The Forbidden City was transformed into the palace museum and for the first time the people of China were able to see behind the walls. Today, seeing behind the walls is as exciting as it was then with an average of 80,000 visitors every day. The Forbidden City is China's largest and best-preserved collection of over 900 ancient buildings.








Temple of Heaven



On a bus ride to see the famous White Pagoda or White Tower in Beihai Park. Free admission because I am over 60 and the staff don't think I will be making the effort to get to the top. How wrong they were and how much are my legs hurting in the pursuit of a good photograph or two. The White Pagoda is situated on an island in the centre of Beihai Park and was built in 1651 during the Qing Dynasty. The walk to the top is worthwhile for the exceptional views across the city.

On my way back to the hotel, I visited the nearby Temple of Heaven which turned out to be a lot more than just a temple. The Temple of Heaven is a vast complex of imperial religious buildings which were visited by the Emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties for biannual ceremonies of prayers and sacrifices to ensure a good harvest. The Temple of Heaven was recognized as a world heritage site in 1998 and described as 'a masterpiece of architecture and landscape design'.

















Summer Palace

The Summer Palace is a UNESCO world Heritage site consisting of palaces, lakes, gardens and walks covering an area of just over one square mile (or just under 3 square kilometres). Well worth a visit but take your hiking shoes.

The palace was the royal retreat for emperors fleeing the summer heat of the city and the retirement playground of Empress Dowager Cixi who was born in 1835 and in a rags to riches story rose to power as the queen regent from 1861 until her death in 1908.

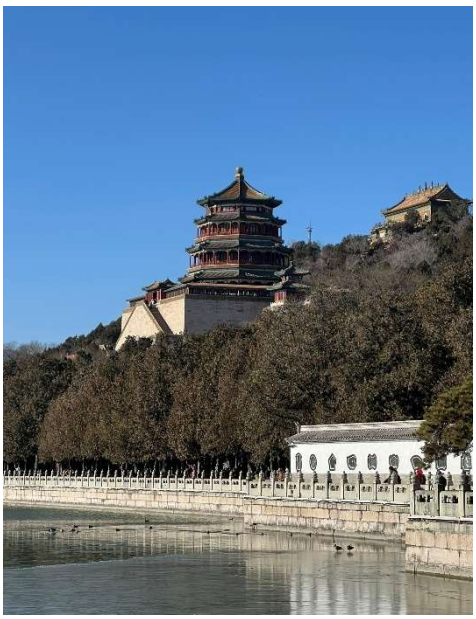
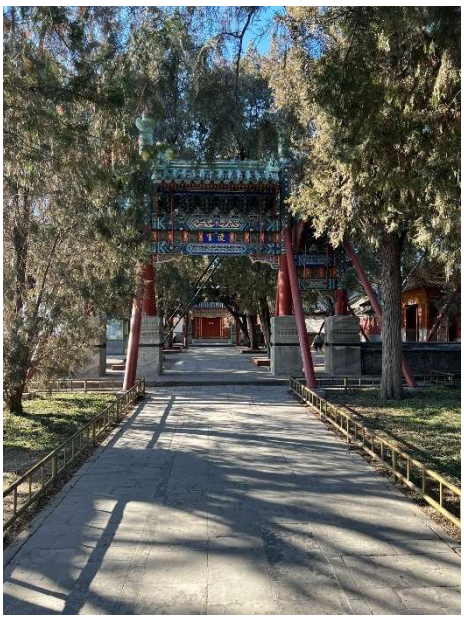
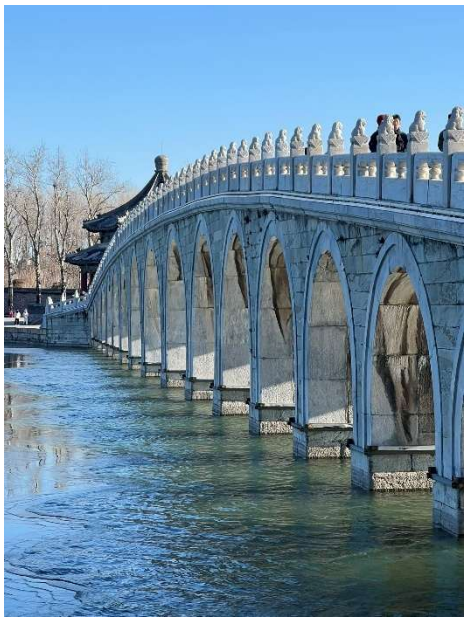
Cixi entered the Forbidden City as a concubine and gave birth to a son in 1856, who later became the Tongzhi Emperor. After the death of the Xianfeng Emperor she orchestrated a coup to secure her position as regent for her five-year-old son.

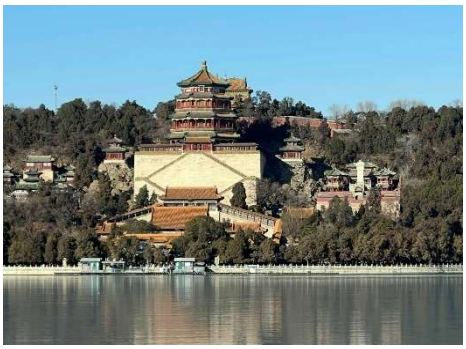
When her son died in 1875, Cixi arranged for her four-year-old nephew to become the Guangxu Emperor which effectively allowed her to continue to hold power behind the scenes, shaping China's policies and responses to foreign pressures.

Emperor Guangxu died after allegedly being poisoned with arsenic. For a long time, it has been speculated that Cixi was responsible, as she would be the sole ruler of China as a result. However, these powers did not last long as she died a day later.








Great Wall of China @ Badaling

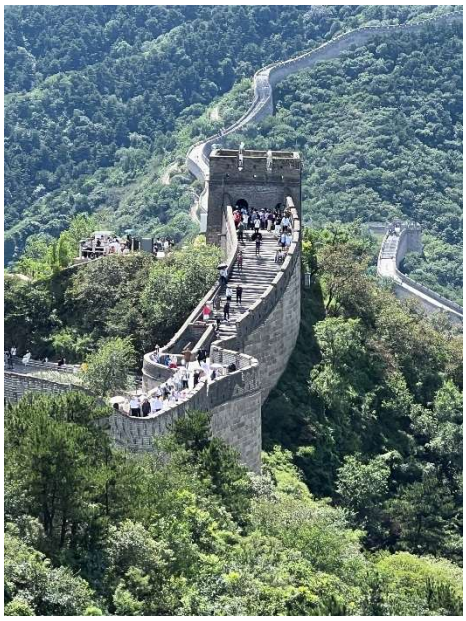
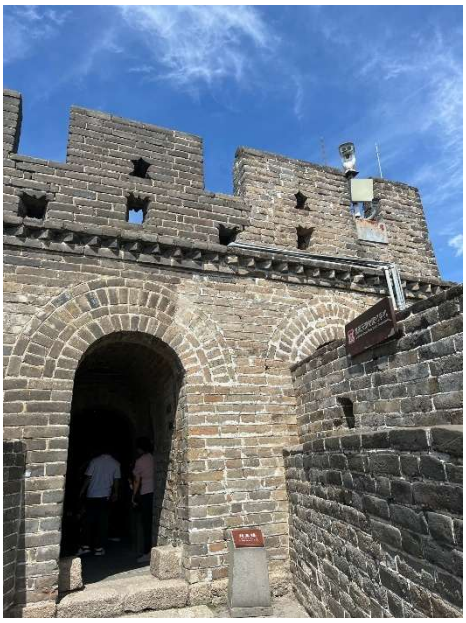


The Great Wall of China is one of the most iconic landmarks in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Originally built to protect Chinese states and empires from invasions and raids by nomadic groups from the north and spans thousands of miles across northern China. Construction began as early as the 7th century BC with the most famous sections built during the Ming dynasty between 1368 and 1644.

The wall is over 13000 miles long (21000 kilometres) and was made from various materials including earth, wood, bricks, stone and sticky rice. Watchtowers and fortresses are strategically placed along the wall for surveillance, communication and storage. The purpose of the wall was entirely military defence and border control.





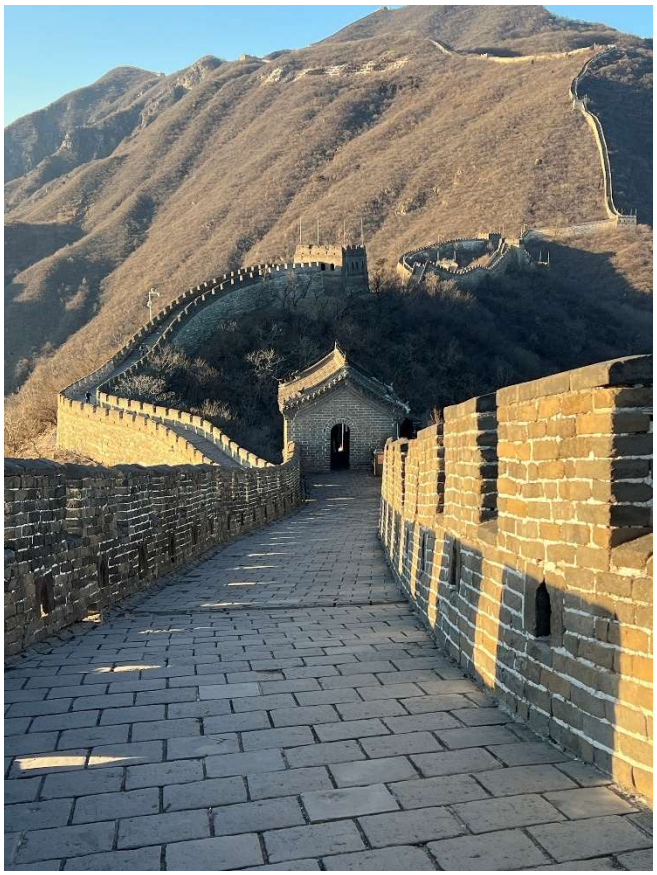
The Badaling section of the wall is the most visited and arguably the best-preserved section of the wall. After extensive renovation, it was the first section of the wall to opened to tourism in 1957. The section is located 43 miles northwest of Beijing with good transport links including direct bus and train links. The wall is accessible for most visitors with well-paved paths, cable cars and handrails.






PS Can I just confirm that the assertion that the Great Wall of China is visible from space is FALSE …unless we are talking about a very low orbit Nobody would say that about the M1 motorway which is a lot wider.

Great Wall of China @ Mutianyu



My last visit to the Great Wall of China was in September 2023 when I visited the section around Badaling (see above) which is possibly one of the busiest parts of the wall because it is so much easier to get there by public transport. This time around I decided to try another section which was advertised as being less busy because it is a little bit more difficult to get to.

The Great Wall of China in Mutianyu is located 44 miles away from the centre of Beijing and can be accessed by taking a tour, bus or taxi…...the taxis are very reasonably priced and can be booked through Alipay. This is one of the more famous sections of the Great Wall and runs from Gubeikou in the east to Juyongguan in the west.

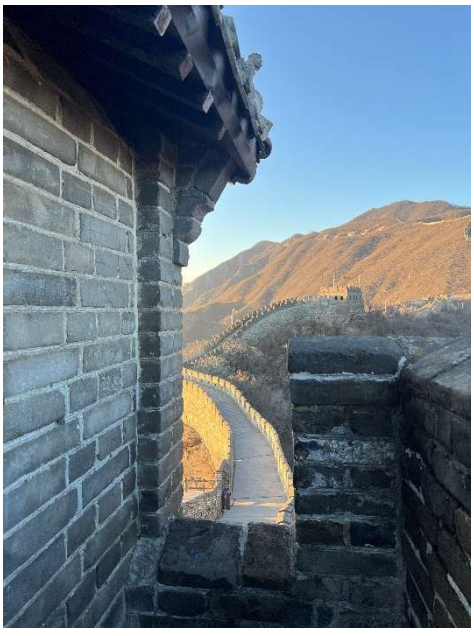
This part of the wall was originally constructed around 1400 years ago and subsequently rebuilt in the early part of the Ming dynasty around 1348 under the supervision of General Xu Da. I found section to be particularly beautiful with some excellent views in all directions. For your additional convenience, there are cable cars to take you up to if you cannot be doing with all those stairs.

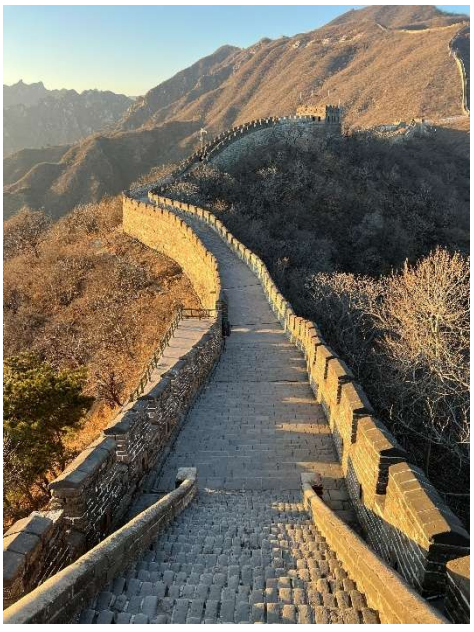
Needless to say, I chose the cable car!!!

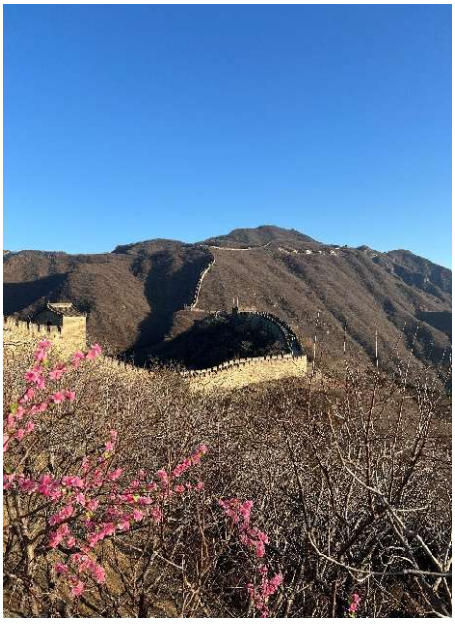


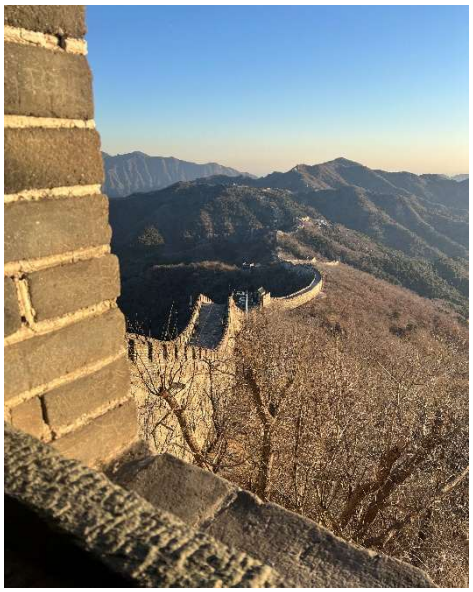
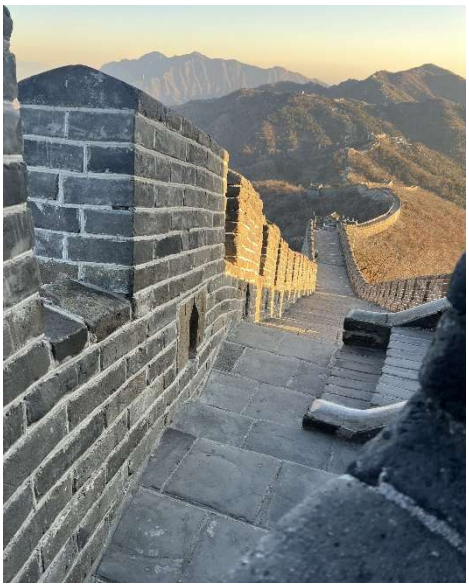











Tianqiao Theatre



Missing my trips to the theatre, so decided to see a show at the Tianqiao Theatre which is a short distance away from my hotel. The show was very well choreographed and offered individual insights from each of the performers, as well as some thoughtful messages on issues such as mental health, forgiveness, kindness and looking after one another.

The audience was comprised, mostly of younger people and families who are clearly out to enjoy themselves. The enthusiasm of the audience was palpable and their clapping and cheering, was much appreciated by those on the stage. The theatre was packed, and I was lucky to get tickets for the show.

For my benefit, presumably, the whole of the performance was in English with Chinese subtitles, provided at each side of the stage. It didn't seem to matter, and the audience seem to enjoy themselves every bit as much as if the performance had been in their own language. The sentiment and messages of the evening are beautifully expressed in the following:

我曾听人说过，
人们进入我们的生活是有原因的
带来我们必须学习的东西。
我们被引导到那些
如果我们允许的话，谁对我们的成长最有帮助。
我们也帮助他们作为回报。
嗯，我不知道我是否相信这是真的
但我知道我就是今天的我
因为我认识你。
很可能是
愿我们此生不再相见。
所以，在我们分手之前，让我说：
我就这么多
是由我从你那里学到的东西组成的。
你会像我心上的手印一样陪伴着我。
现在无论我们的故事如何结束
我知道你通过成为我的朋友改写了我的。

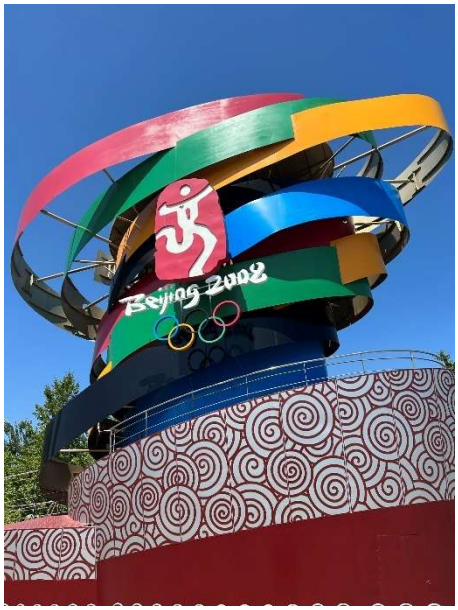




Which translates as:

I've heard it said,
That people come into our lives for a reason
Bringing something we must learn.
And we are led to those
Who help us most to grow if we let them.
And we help them in return.
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true
But I know I'm who I am today
Because I knew you.
It well may be
That we will never meet again in this lifetime.
So, let me say before we part:
So much of me
Is made of what I learned from you.
You'll be with me like a handprint on my heart.
And now whatever way our stories end
I know you have rewritten mine by being my friend.

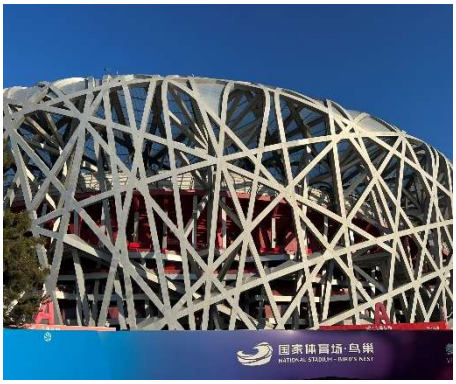
Olympic Park

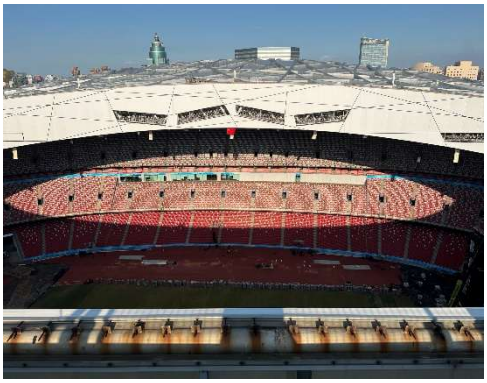


Next stop is the Olympic Park which was constructed for the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2008 Summer Paralympics…… this is my third visit. After the games, the site was repurposed for public use with a convention centre and opportunities to host sports, cultural events, exhibitions, concerts.

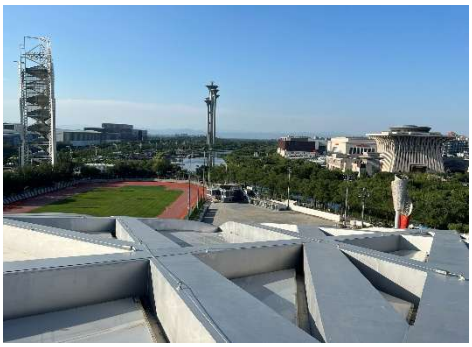
The centre piece of the park is the Bird's Nest Stadium which was designed by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. The iconic structure has an exterior resembling a bird's nest and the stadium symbolises a cradle that holds the hopes of humanity for the future. The stadium hosts sporting event as well as concerts.

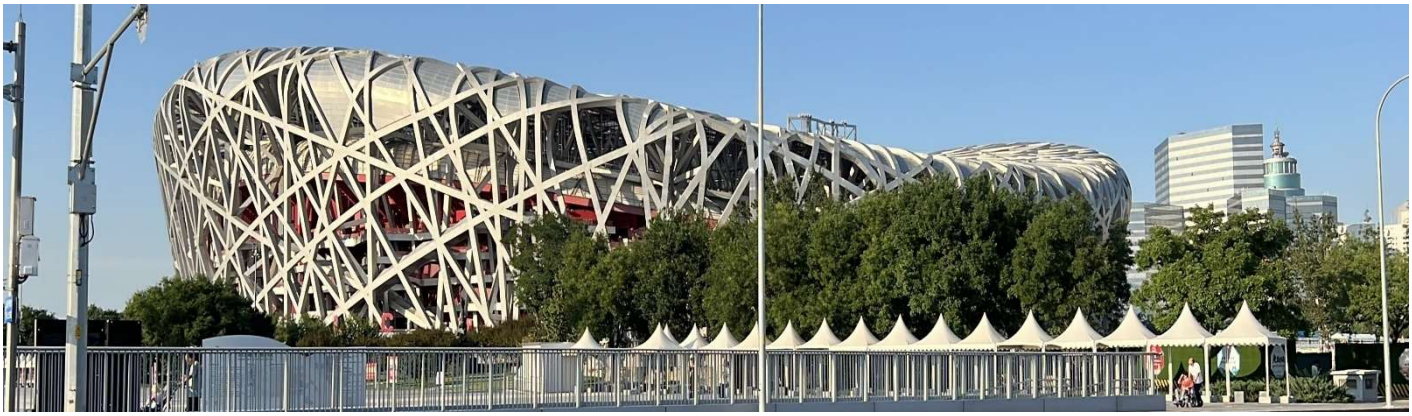
If you want a really unobstructed view of the park, then your best bet is to get to the roof of this beautiful building where you can see the whole of the Olympic Park stretched in all directions. It is a lift ride and a couple of stairs before you are on the roof looking down on the park including the aquatic centre which is now the largest water park in China.









Olympic Park at night

On my most recent trip to China, I was wondering what to do on my one-night stopover in Beijing and thought I would revisit the Olympic Park. The stadium looks as beautiful at night as it does in the daytime although I was unable to access the inside of the stadium of get myself back onto that roof. Maybe my pictures will encourage you to visit the park in the daytime, and time permitting, at night too.






Parks in China

One of the surprising things about China is the number of parks which seem to present themselves at every turn. According to available statistics, there are more than 20,000 parks in Chinese cities, providing each resident with an average of 15 square metres of green space. The growth of this provision is evident when you realise that there were just 2000 parks in 1990 and 10,000 in 2010.

China's once-pollution-choked skies have steadily improved, according to measurements taken by NASA satellites. But researchers say that there is still a long way to go to clean the air and protect the citizens. The decision to build parks instead of skyscrapers should be applauded given the shortage of space and the opportunity of big money selling available land to property developers.

I have visited many such parks and immensely enjoyed the peace and tranquillity, which they offer. At nighttime, these self-same parks are used for exercising, line dancing, ballroom dancing and flag-waving (to name a few) contributing further to the health, welfare and wellbeing of citizens.

The park noticeboard reminds us that admission is free although 'It is forbidden for visitors to perform uncivilized actions including the intemperance, the gamble and the brawl……" and 'Anyone who violates the stipulations of above-mentioned terms will be disposed in accordance with the regulations…….'

Here are a sample of my pictures from numerous parks across China.











Daxing International









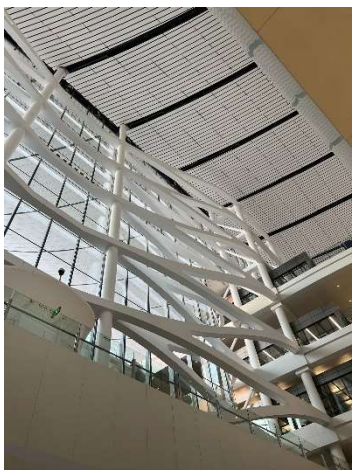
Daxing International Airport in Beijing must rate as one of my most favourite airports in the world. Beijing Daxing International Airport, designed by Zaha Hadid, opened in 2019 and is one of the largest airports in the world. Its striking starfish-shaped design allows for efficient passenger flow and significantly reduces the walking distances…. something which London Heathrow might consider!!!

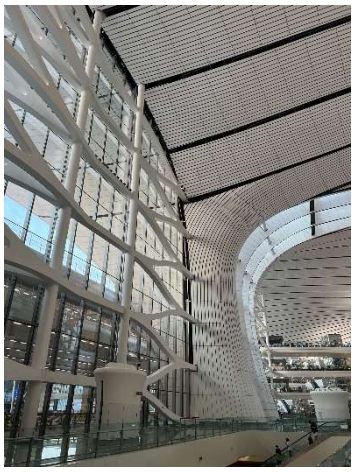
I first visited the airport in September 2023 when I took a flight to Dalian (see below) for the sole purpose of flying from this airport. In July 2024, I was fortunate to fly into this airport on my second visit to China with British Airways and I visited the airport, yet again, in January 2025 travelling from Shanghai to Beijing with Juneyao Air.

The airport is situated approximately 30 miles from Beijing with high-speed rail links and business style seats in the economy section. Various reports suggest this is the largest airport in the world, but this is not true although it is the largest single terminal airport in the world. The statistics are impressive, and the airport has four runways with plans for a further three runways which could possibly make it the largest airport in the world in terms of passengers.

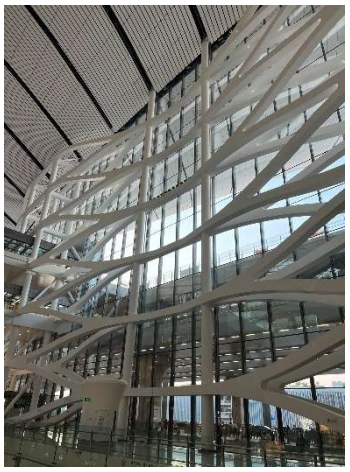
Of particular interest to me is the fact that the airport was designed by the architecture team of Zaha Hadid who tragically passed away in 2016. Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid was an Iraqi-British architect, artist and designer. She was born in Baghdad and studied mathematics at the American University of Beirut before moving to London to study architecture. In her early days, she had a reputation as a 'paper architect' because many of her designs were too avant-garde to move beyond the sketch phase and actually be built.

In 2004 she became the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize which is widely considered to be the Nobel prize for architecture. In 2012, she was made a Dame for services to architecture. Her design for the Heydar Aliyev Centre in Baku, Azerbaijan (which I visited two years ago) won her further awards and in February 2016, the month preceding her death at the age of 65, she became the first woman to be awarded the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects.

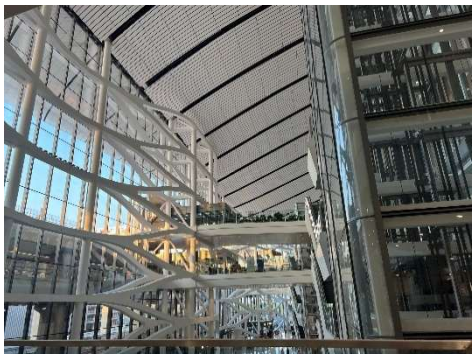








Her other major works include the London Aquatics Centre for the 2012 Olympics, the Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton, the Sheikh Zayed Bridge in Abu Dhabi, the Dubai Opera House and the Al-Janoub Stadium in Qatar. Her company, Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA), continue to work on a range of projects across the world with many of them based here in China as well as Vauxhall's controversial twin skyscrapers (as part of the Vauxhall Cross Island scheme) which was recently approved after a lengthy planning battle.





Galaxy Soho and Wangjing Soho

Just when you think that this holiday could not get any more exciting, I find out that my final destination has a shopping centre designed by was Zaha Hadid who, as I am sure you know by now, is one of my favourite architects. I had already sampled the delights of her projects at Daxing Airport and Guangzhou Opera House, so this was going to be an added bonus before I take my flight back to the UK.



The Beijing Galaxy Soho is the biggest shopping mall in Beijing and has been recognised by the Royal Institute of British architects as 'demonstrating a rare general city in a country determined to outdo the West in terms of commercialisation.' Others describe it as an eyesore which has contributed to the destruction of Chinese architectural heritage in Beijing.



Afterwards, I met up with a long-standing friend of mine and she tells me that there is another building designed by the same architect and invites me to take a ride on the back of her scooter to go and see it. The Beijing Wangjing Soho a complex of three 'curvilinear asymmetric skyscrapers. The design is definitely Zaha Hadid's style but lacking in the grace that her other projects hold.

My sincere thanks to Michelle for taking me around the sites of Beijing on the back of her scooter which was an experience in itself. I was surprised how you managed to steer the thing with me weighting down the back end. It was a lovely to see you and to meet at once again with your lovely daughter……. thank you both for your time xxx









National Art Museum of China



Located in the heart of Beijing near the bustling Dongcheng District, the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) is a veritable treasure trove of Chinese artistic heritage and a must-visit for art lovers. Established in 1963, this iconic institution houses one of the world's largest collections of modern and contemporary Chinese art, with over 110,000 works spanning traditional ink paintings, calligraphy, oil paintings, sculptures, and avant-garde installations.

The museum's grand, Soviet-inspired architecture, topped with a striking, yellow-glazed roof, is a visual feast in itself, blending mid-20th-century design with cultural gravitas. Inside you will find a delightful collection masterpieces by legends like Xu Beihong (renowned for his horse paintings), Qi Baishi (celebrated for his delicate brushwork), and contemporary innovators such as Ai Weiwei. Outside of the art museum, the serene sculpture garden offers a peaceful retreat.

MAMOC is free to enter but you need to book online in advance…. I did this outside the museum while I was waiting in line so should not be too much of a problem.















Dalian



I hadn't really appreciated just how big China was (9.6 million square metres) until someone pointed out to me that it was virtually the same size as the whole of Europe (10 million square metres). In addition, China has over 9000 miles of coastline, but I have yet to find out anything about Chinese beaches. Most of my tour of China so far has been completely inland.

The closest beach to Beijing is approximately 100 miles away with that guy books do not how you recommend it as a beach resort. The port of Dalian suggested for a possible visit with a 5-hour high speed train ride or 50-minute flight. In the circumstances, I thought the train could not be that fast, but the map will explain why this is the case.

Another reason for flying to Dalian was the opportunity this gave me to see, for the very first time, the new Beijing Daxing International Airport. The airport opened in September 2019 and is Beijing's second airport but destined to be the biggest. Unfortunately, my flight back home departs from Beijing Capital International Airport although I have since visited Daxing Airport on three occasions.

I decided to stay overnight in Dalian. I enjoyed my visit to the port and took a rather long bus ride down to the nearest beaches, which were a lot less spectacular than I thought they were going to be. In the evening, I stumbled across an area of town, which can only be best described as the Russian quarter since I honestly believed, I had just entered Russian territory.



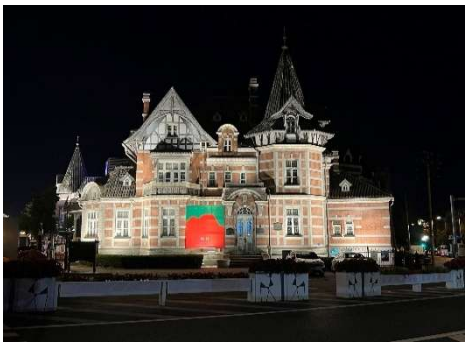






















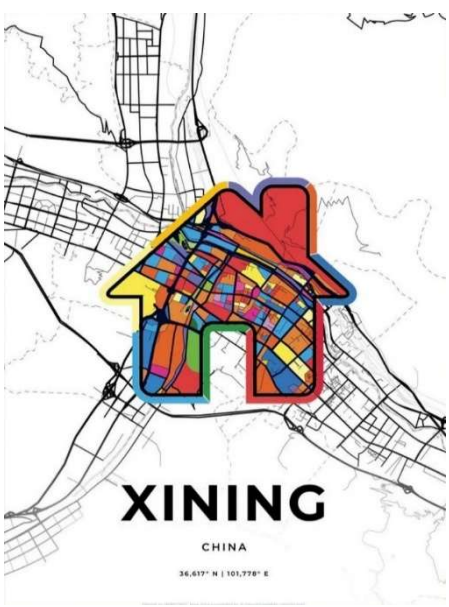



8 hr 33 min
840 km
1 hr 15 min
Beijing
Tianjin
天津市
Qinhuangdao
秦皇岛市
Dalian
LIAONING
Dandong
丹东市
North Korea
Pyongyang
평양
Seoul
서울
Incheon
인천
South Korea
Yantai
烟台市
Weihai
威海市
Weifang
潍坊市
Zibo
淄博市
Jinan
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Qingdao
青岛市
SHANDONG

Chapter 8: Xining







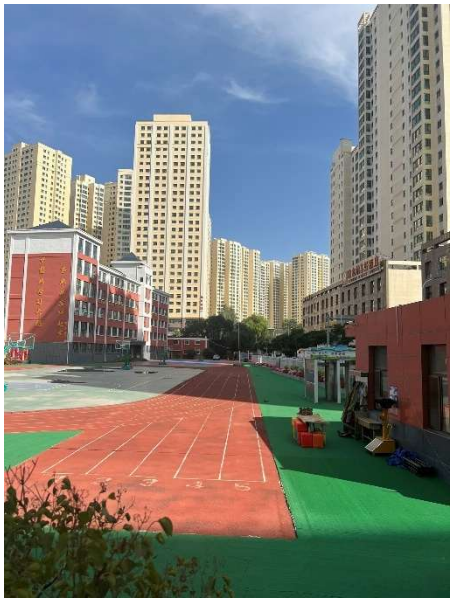
Xining is the capital of Qinghai province in central China and neighbours the Tibetan Plateau. Xining is approximately 7500 feet above sea level so a good place to acclimatise for my destination in Tibet which is situated approximately 12000 feet above sea level. The train journey from Beijing to Tibet takes two days and from Xining just one day…... by express train!!!

I have never heard of Xining either, but my abiding memory of the place are some very ugly (but presumably functional) tower blocks and a lot of mosques…. internet sources suggest Xining is home to 80 mosques. Approximately one sixth (limited internet sources suggest one sixth to one third) of Xining's population is Muslim and Xining is home to one of China's largest mosques.

My guidebook which usually lists the top 20 places to visit manages just 7 attractions in Xining and five of those are a considerable way away from the city. For example, the Quinghai Lake, described as one of the largest salt lakes surrounded by a 'golden sea of rapeseed flowers,' is a 180-mile round trip.

This is an excellent place to practice your Chinese or develop your expertise with Google translate (which is banned in China so you will need your VPN). Very few people here speak English (and why should they?) and the only signposts I saw with an English translation provided were for the public toilets.







Notwithstanding, the public toilets are extremely clean, free and readily available. However, if you are looking for a chemist, then I should forget it. Most of the chemists I visited turned out to be off licenses and unfortunately alcohol is not the best medicine for altitude sickness. I am going to find out a little bit more about those mosques and share some more pictures later on. Watch this space.

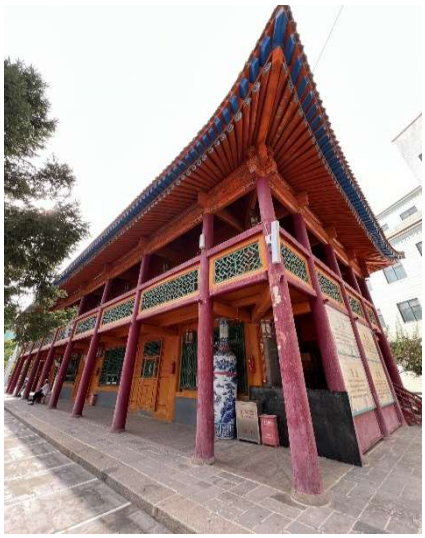








The city is also home to one of China's largest mosques called the Dongguan Great Mosque which was originally built in 1380. The mosque was built as a combination of Chinese and Islamic architectural styles and has recently undergone extensive restoration. Less than a quarter of a mile away is the Nanguan Mosque which is much more typical of the Arabic style building with pillars, arches and domes as well as plenty of seating to sit down and admire the architecture.



Dongguan Great Mosque

The Dongguan Great Mosque was originally built in 1380 and is one of the four great mosques in Northwest China. The original mosque had colourful white arches along the outside and a green and white dome with two tall minarets. The mosque saw renovations in the late 19th to early 20th century and suffered heavy damages during a period of political conflict in the 1990s.

However, the mosque that is shown in the tourist guidebooks and on social media is nothing like the pictures suggest. The mosque is still open but is presently undergoing redevelopment. I wasn't sure if I was in the right place but the notice on the door welcomed me to the Dongguan Great Mosque and the prayer hall, front gate and the beautiful clock tower remain pretty well intact.







Nanguan Mosque

This beautiful and recently (re)constructed mosque is really quite an astonishing sight. Built from marble and a variety of other stones and carved tilework, the entire complex is a photogenic opportunity. The mosque was originally built in 1934 although it is suggested that a mosque existed on the site as far back as the 14th century.

In 1958, it was repurposed as an Embroidery Factory and later used as a school. In 1979, the mosque was returned to the local religious community as part of the nation's policy on restoring religious freedoms. The original dome and the two minarets which can be seen in pictures online have gone but what is left is still beautiful and well used for its original purpose.

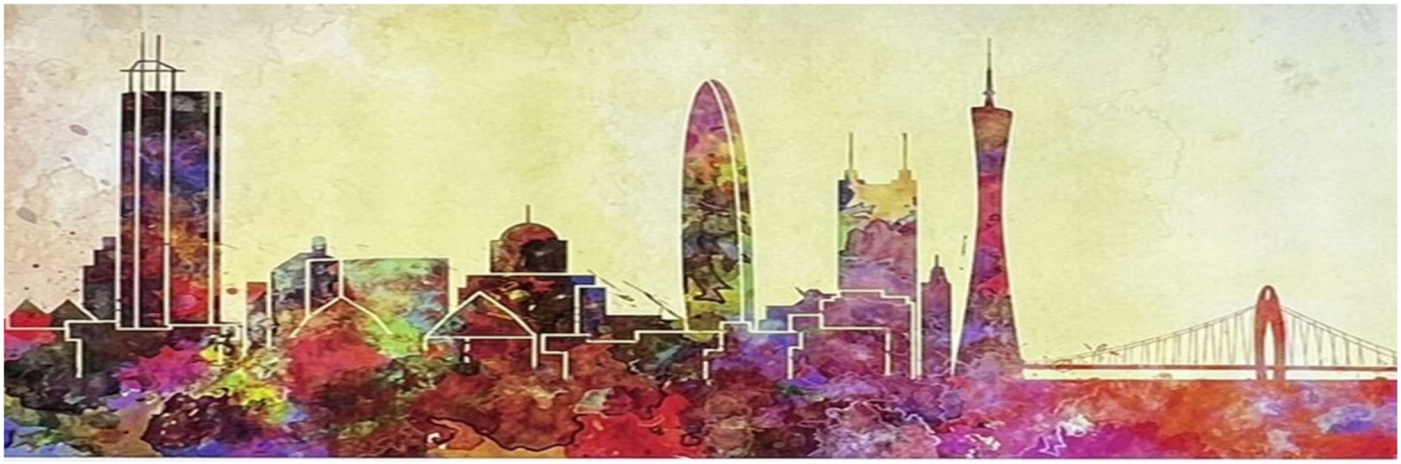






Chapter 9: Guangzhou

Most people have heard of Beijing and Shanghai but what about Guangzhou? Guangzhou is China's third-largest city with a population more than 18 million ……that is about twice the size of the population of London.



Guangzhou is the capital of the Guangdong Province in Southern China and just over 75 miles away from Hong Kong. Its proximity to Hong Kong and location on the Pearl River were the reasons why this was the first Chinese port to be regularly visited by European traders.

This city was once called Canton and is considered to be the home of traditional (ie Cantonese) Chinese food. Indeed, there are more restaurants per capita in Guangzhou than anywhere else in China.



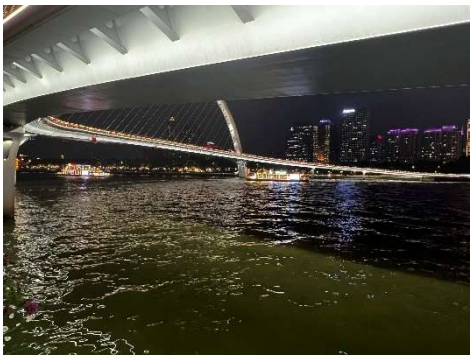


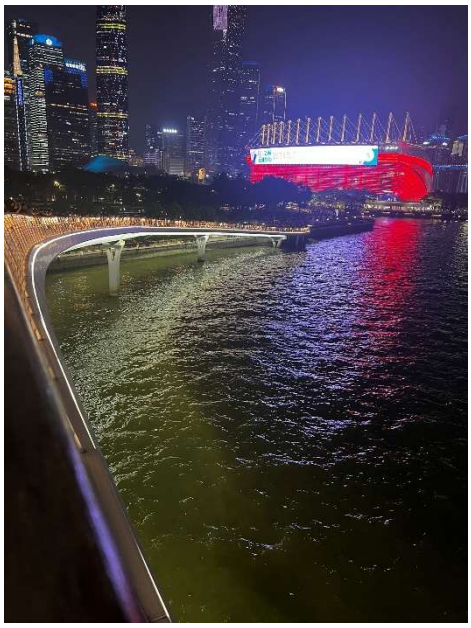









Guangzhou Opera House



One of the reasons for coming to Guangzhou was the opportunity to see another one of Zaha Hadid's designs for the Guangzhou Opera House. As mentioned in my piece on Daxing Airport, Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid was an Iraqi-British architect, artist and designer who became the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize which is widely considered to be the Nobel prize for architecture. Having already acquainted me with her work on the Dubai Opera House, it is interesting to see some of her earlier ideas and how her style has developed over time.



The Guangzhou Opera House was opened in 2010 and is situated at the heart of the cultural neighbourhood. This was Zaha Hadid's first project in China where she is highly regarded. The structure of the building is designed to represent two pebbles washed up by the Pearl River. Inside, futuristic glass panels create a visual effect that has been described as pebbles on the bed of the Pearl River. The opera house includes a 1800-seat auditorium whilst the smaller building offers a 400-seat multifunction hall designed for performance art, opera and concerts in the round.

I didn't get to see the auditorium as rehearsals were taking place, so I have included this video downloaded from the internet…... https://youtu.be/EePmw1yz4EY?si=oRh_TWvqHsRk4qsg





Canton Tower



Sitting on the banks of the Pearl River, the Canton Tower is a visible Guangzhou landmark and a notable feature of the city's global skyline. The tower is 1968 feet high (approximately 600 metres) and once held the title of the tallest structure in China upon its completion. The structure is best described as a graceful latticework of steel and is a masterpiece of both art and engineering.

The tower's lattice structure is not merely for show as its construction has immense strength to withstand typhoon-force winds and seismic activity, while simultaneously offering an iconic, slender profile. At nighttime, the building is a shimmering symphony of light at night, with thousands of LED fixtures transforming the structure into a colossal canvas for dazzling displays that reflect over the river.

The observation decks offer 360-degree panoramas of the city below as well as some additional rides for those seeking even more excitement including the world's highest outdoor observation walkway complete with a transparent glass floor. In addition, the tower includes TV and radio transmission facilities and a revolving restaurant offering fine dining …whatever that looks like in China?





Religious sites

My last day in Guangzhou and I am catching up on my religious sites…….one mosque, one temple and one cathedral.

The Huaisheng Mosque also known as the Lighthouse Mosque is the main mosque of Guangzhou. The most unusual feature of the mosque is the minaret which looks just like a lighthouse giving the mosque its alternate name. The original mosque is considered to date back over 1300 years which would make it one of the oldest mosques in the world.










The Temple of the Six Banyan Trees dates back to the 6th century. The temple boasts a very impressive 17 story pagoda, the Hua Ta or Flower Pagoda which was built in the 11th century. The temple was given its current name by the exiled poet Su Dongbo who visited the temple and wrote a poem about the six banyan trees in the courtyard.







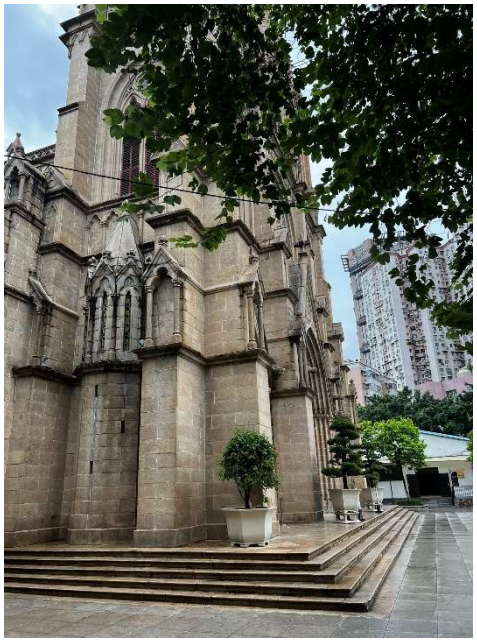



順时针转 顺风顺水
常輪法
安民人



The Sacred Heart Cathedral is the seat of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Guangzhou. The cathedral took 25 years to build and was completed in 1888. It is one of the few cathedrals in the world to be entirely built of granite which had to be transported from Hong Kong. As the notice on the front gate says, the cathedral is closed to tourists……not very impressed!!!!









Chapter 10: Wuhan



I am on the last lap of my trip to China and decide to visit Wuhan because it is a place that we've all heard of, and I wanted to go and see for myself given that it was on my way. Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province, is one of central China's most dynamic cities, blending deep history with rapid modern growth. It is strategically divided by the Yangtze and Han rivers…… the Yangtze River Bridge was particularly impressive.

Wuhan has played pivotal roles in Chinese history. In 1911, the Wuchang Uprising began there leading to the overthrow of imperial rule and the founding of the Republic of China. Wuhan briefly served as China's wartime capital and its history is layered through colonial-era buildings, republican-era landmarks and revolutionary sites scattered across the city.



The city itself is actually a union of three historic towns: Wuchang, Hankou and Hanyang which merged together in 1927 to form today's Wuhan. The population of Wuhan is just over 11 million people so it roughly the same size as London. However, it is much more spread out than London….in fact the city is 10 times the area of Greater London.

Wuhan is considered to be the political, financial, commercial and cultural centre of Central China. The city boasts 89 universities with approximately 1.3 million enrolments. Besides its universities, Wuhan is also famous for its high-tech industries and vibrant street life as well as bustling riverside promenades which are as busy at night as they are in the daytime.





Yellow Crane Tower

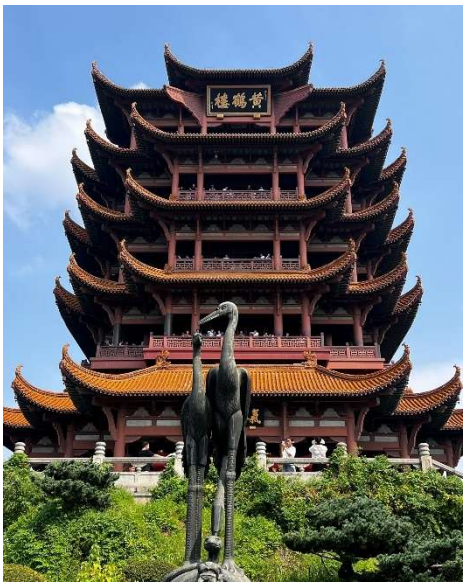
The Yellow Crane Tower is a traditional Chinese tower located in Wuhan. The current tower was built from 1981 to 1985, but the tower has existed in various forms since the 2nd century. The tower is one of the most renowned buildings on the Yangtze River and its cultural significance led to it being made the symbol of Wuhan City. The top floor (reachable by lift) offers a panoramic view of the city and also overlooks the Yangtze River and the double-decked Yangtze River Bridge which was considered groundbreaking when it was unveiled in 1968.



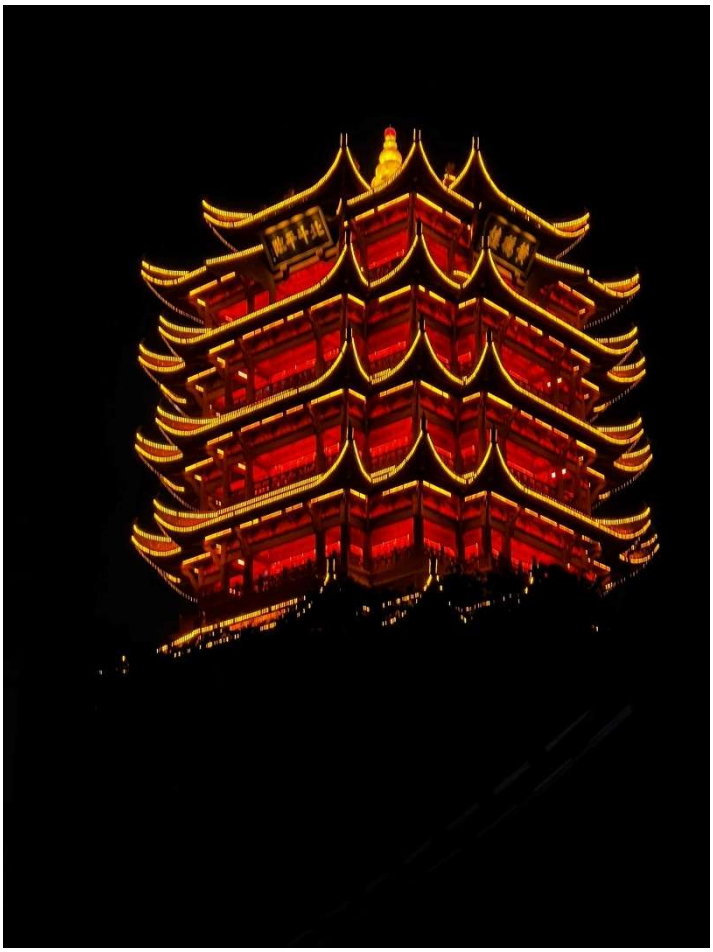












Yangtze River Bridge

The Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge is a marvel of history and engineering which was completed in 1957 and was the first bridge to span the Yangtze in Wuhan. The bridge is double-decked the upper deck for vehicles (4 lanes) and a lower deck for the railway. The bridge's striking design blends Soviet-influenced grandeur with traditional Chinese pavilions.

The bridge was the first to be built over the Yangtze River and connects Snake Hill and Turtle Hill providing the link between northern and southern China. It is a short distance from the Yellow Crane Tower where you can b=view the bridge from above. In addition, you can walk or cycle across its pedestrian pathways which offer panoramic views of the Yangtze River below.



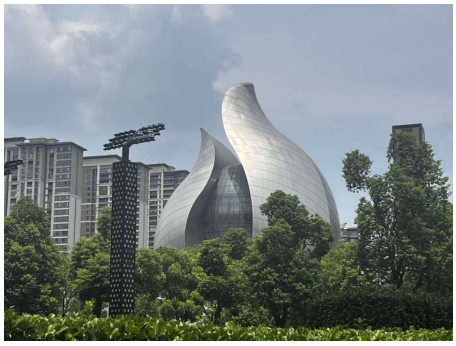




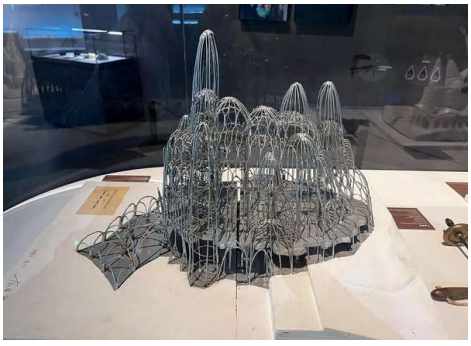


Science & Technology Museum (Gaudi Exhibition)

The city is very keen to accommodate exhibitions and has numerous exhibition centres to facilitate this. At the time of my visit, I was incredibly surprised to find a poster advertising an exhibition of the work of Gaudi although I could only identify the dates as the rest was written in Chinese. I tracked down the venue as the science and technology museum but unfortunately there were two of them and the first one, I visited was just a building site. I managed to find the poster again and used Google Translate to find the exact location where the exhibition was being held at temporally. Having recently visited Barcelona, and seen a lot of Gaudi's work, this exhibition was both interesting and informative.

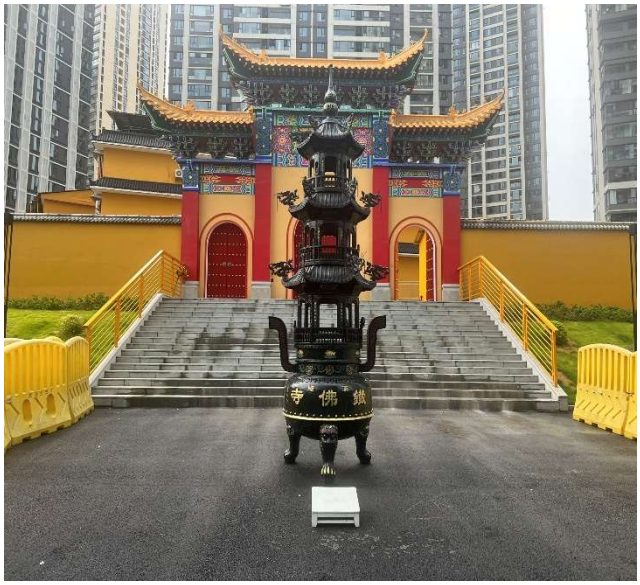






Tiefo Temple



Tiefo Temple meaning Iron Buddha Temple is a Buddhist temple situated in the Hanyang District of Wuhan. The temple traces its origins to the Song Dynasty, when a large iron Buddha statue gave the temple its name. The site was historically one of the region's spiritual landmarks, though it fell into decline during the twentieth century as urban expansion reshaped the city.

The modern Tiefo Temple seen today is a faithful reconstruction blending traditional Chinese temple design…. ornate eaves, bright vermilion gates and intricate wooden carving with contemporary urban surroundings. The contrast between the temple's golden roofs and the surrounding high-rise buildings highlights the tension and coexistence between heritage and modernity in present-day Wuhan.

At the temple's entrance stands a large bronze incense burner used for offerings and prayers, symbolising purification and the link between the human and spiritual realms. The fate of the Iron Buddha is unknown, and I did a lot of research to track it down but to no avail. Some sources say it was melted down in the 1960s while others mention restricted access. If you know anything then please let me know?







Zhongshan Park

Nestled in the bustling heart of Hankou, Zhongshan Park is a serene oasis in an otherwise busy and hectic city. The park was established in 1910 and later renamed to honour Dr. Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan) blending classical Chinese landscaping with modern leisure. Highlights include the Moon Lake and the Rose Garden as well as the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Pavilion. By day, locals practice tai chi or dance in shaded plazas, and, by night, the park's lantern-lit pathways create a magical glow. This is an ideal spot to unwind after exploring the city. Entrance is free and it is easily accessible via the metro (Line 2).








Chapter 11: Reflections on China

I have had some amazing times in China with many fond memories to take away from my various trips including ……riding the fastest train in the world, Shanghai in the daytime, Chongqing at night, the fake town of London, Zhangjiajie National Park and the Avatar mountains, walking over the famous glass bridge, weird flavoured crisps, Xi'an's incredible army of warriors, the sleepy Chengdu pandas, the top of the Leshan Giant Buddha, a Broadway night in Beijing, reminiscing in Tiananmen Square, strolling along the Great Wall of China, a walk to the top of the Olympic National stadium, a day trip to the seaside and my visits to the White Pagoda, the Heavenly Temple and the Summer Palace as well as the beautiful architecture of Daxing Airport and the Guangzhou Opera House.



This guide is just one of a growing series of documentary travel guides collated under 'The Where To Go' banner. The following titles are presently available or coming really soon ……

