

Travel Scene



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Crossroads
Iris Jones

China tourist activities a mystery

Where would you go and what would you do if you could spend two weeks in China this summer? That's the question I was asked by Jane Bibeau of Bloomfield Township and Sandy Pennington of Novi, who plan to join Jane's daughter in China in either July or August.

Hence Bibeau, 23, has already had an interesting travel life since she graduated from Mercy High School in Farmington. She has lived in Finland, Estonia and Tahiti as part of a program offered by Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Okla.

A youth pastor in Tulsa recommended her for a similar position with a Christian group in Shenyang, in the Chinese province of Liaoning, not far from the border of Korea.

"The three of us would like to see significant areas of China this summer," Jane wrote. "Could you please tell us what we should see, and recommend a geographic area that would break up the trip on our way to China or on our way home?"

Jane and Sandy are looking for information about the weather, the cost of the trip, and whether they should try to include places like Tibet, Singapore or Malaysia.

If they had asked me about any other part of the world, I would have a file drawer full of information, but I have never been to China and travelers are just starting to go back there 18 months after the brief uprising in Beijing.

My first stop was a letter to the China National Tourist Office, 233 West Broadway, Suite 201, Glendale, Calif. 91204. That's usually a good way to get information, but I have waited several weeks without a reply.

I put the question to Kathy Ambrose, the manager of Travel Works in Southfield. She hasn't been to China but has all the information needed to book China travel through wholesalers like Pacific Delight Tours of New York or Silkway Travel Ltd. of Hong Kong.

I also called Jean West of Oakland Travel in Birmingham, who has booked many people on such tours. Jean agrees with me that Singapore, Malaysia and Tibet are too far from China to be practical side-trips on a two-week journey. When I flew to Singapore on Singapore Airlines last March, it was a five-hour flight south from Tokyo to Singapore, about the same time as flying from New York to London.

Jean suggested that Jane and Sandy start with a few guidebooks from their local library, so they can narrow their choices. She also recommended that they do at least part of their trip on a tour out of Hong Kong.

"Most tours go to Shanghai, Beijing, Sian — that's the archeological site of the life-sized terracotta soldiers — and maybe on a boat trip down the Yangtze River."

Jean recommends a Hong Kong stopover, where you can shop and maybe take a hydrofoil to Macau. I have been to Hong Kong and I second the motion, even if all you do is wander down the colorful streets or stare at the beautiful scenery.

Ed Jamieson of Northville Travel has taken groups to China and highly recommends it for the right kind of travelers.

"I took 40 members of the Michigan Dairy Farmers Association to China with Pacific Delight Tours," he said. "It was a 12-day trip with three nights in Hong Kong to adjust to the new time zone, and the rest of the time traveling south from Beijing to Shanghai."

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SINGAPORE

Good joss among the high-rises

By Iris Sanderson Jones
special writer

In another time and place, Singapore would be a city-state, or a kingdom, and this story would begin with "once upon a time."

Once upon a time there was an island 25 miles long and 16 miles wide off the Malay Peninsula, a pencil dot at the southeast tip of Asia.

When British East India Company officials created a trading post halfway between China and India, they named it Singapore, "lion city." The island was a swamp, but people brought their skills from China and India, worked hard, and soon ships from all over the world sailed into its natural harbor.

People lived in shop-houses, making shoes and joss sticks and other things in the open-fronted stores and living in the quarters above. Merchants, calligraphers and children spilled out into the streets. The shop-houses were edged by the five-foot way, a covered walkway mandated by Sir Stamford Raffles when he founded the city as a British trading post in 1819.

I lived in that Asian city during the later 1950s, and went back in 1990 when Singapore was celebrating its 45th anniversary as an independent nation, most of it under the benevolent dictatorship of regularly-re-elected Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

The city of shop-houses — that was the picture I carried in my mind. I was eager to learn whether the oriental city I knew was still there. Would I find the curry lady of Tanglin Market, who clucked over my blonde babies and challenged me to eat durian?

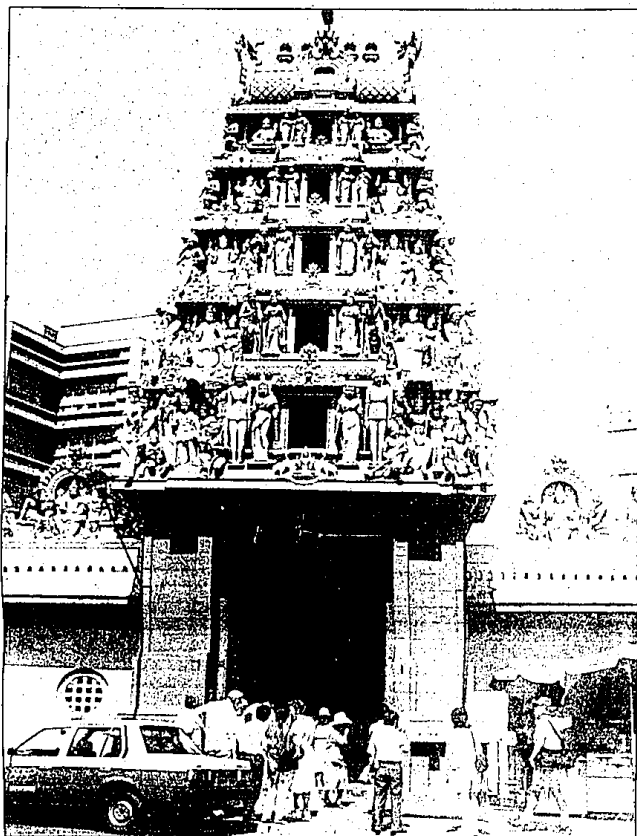
Would I see the street hawkers that sold sweets wrapped in leaves, the shopkeepers whose voices followed me down the street: "Buy a ring lady. Come see my shop?"

My first impression was that the Asian city I knew was gone. In its place I found a contemporary city where men and women in western dress travel by car and subway to high-rise hotels and office centers, rushing home every night to multi-storied apartment buildings.

The kampongs, where people lived in wooden houses high above the ground, were almost gone. Eighty percent of the 2.6 million people now live in high-rises.

When I taxied along Tanglin Road, I had to lean down to see the tops of high-rise hotels soaring above what were once fields. The market was gone. The curry lady was gone. The only sign of durian, a fruit that smells like rotten, sticky, but delicious, were a few signs in hotels saying "It is forbidden to bring durian into this lobby."

The British built this city as a free



This is the Sri Mariamman Hindu temple in the heart of Singapore's Chinatown. While the small nation is filled with high-rise office buildings and apartments now, the old oriental city is still there, under the facade of modernity.

port, and the sea has been its trademark ever since. Hundreds of ships anchor offshore and the colored sails of windsurfers fill the water between shore and ship. French perfume and Irish lace can be bought at duty-free prices. Oriental goods are not nearly as visible.

The British were so accustomed to facing the sea, they had fixed guns facing out to sea when the Japanese bicycled down the peninsula and across the causeway that connects the island city to the mainland during World War II.

The British surrendered to the Japanese around a Ford Motor Company conference table on Bukit Timah Road. Many a Ford employee from Michigan subsequently sat at that table before it was moved to a

museum on Sentosa Island, reached by cable car or ferry.

Sentosa, a \$2-million development of beaches, museums and other attractions, was one of many new sights I would see for the first time. But first I wanted to find out if our old apartment building still stood amid the splendor of the Regent, the Omni Marco Polo, the Sheraton and Shangri-la hotels.

St. Martin's Drive was still there. The apartment was there, newly painted, across from the house where hundreds of fireworks were exploded during Chinese New Year. Fireworks are forbidden in the city now.

"Rich people live up here now," the taxi driver said. The house next door to our apartment was pretty rich in those long ago days as I remember. One Chinese man lived there with three wives, one on each floor, and 27 children.

I remembered the day we moved in, with our two tow-headed sons. The amahs and the 27 children were singing at the top of their lungs. "Davy, Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier." So much for exoticism. The house and the 27 kids are gone now, along with Ah Soong, my amah, a servant known as a black-and-white because they traditionally wore loose black pants and white tunics. Nobody in this affluent city wants to be a servant any more, so those who can get permission from the government import their servants from the Philippines.

Singapore looked so much like New York City except it is clean, safe and well-run that it took me a few days to realize that the old oriental city is still there under the new glass-and-steel high-rises.

The food hawkers used to sell from street corners, but Singapore is a cleaned-up city, so hawker food is now served on plastic tables under the trees in government-owned "hawker centers" like Newton Circus or Cuppage Center. Stalls sell chicken rice, Chinese char siu, Indian biryani, Malay curry, giant prawns and lobsters, oyster omelets, cuttlefish and especially satay.

In the old days we bought satay, barbecued chicken or meat dipped in peanut sauce — from hawkers who squatted over their barbeque grills on Beach Road. Now they are scattered through every hawker center.

The joss makers can still be found in the industrial park of a satellite town called Ang Mo Kio. Giant, figures made of saccharine mixed with cinnamon or camphor are created in open-fronted buildings and burned in front of temples and other places for luck.

A few yards down the street you can watch people make huge fan

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Snorkeling near Australia's barrier reef

By Allen I. Moore
special writer

Snorkeling in the warm clear waters off Australia's Great Barrier Reef was the highlight of a nine-week trip to Australia last year. My wife Christina and I took day tours into "Crocodile Dundee" country and rode the Kuranda Rail-Road, but the best and last tour was to the reef 30 miles east of the Australian coastal resort town of Cairns.

Cairns is a pleasant seaside town in the tropical northeastern state of Queensland. It is on Trinity Bay, surrounded by the rugged Atherton Mountains. We stayed in a modern hotel and took guided day tours, including one into the croc-infested Daintree River, but diving the reef was the epitome of "getting away from it all."

We sailed out aboard a huge catamaran called Great Adventures. Our first stop was 25 miles offshore at Green Island, which typifies the palm tree islands of the south seas, with its white sandy beaches and shark barriers.

We disembarked for lunch at a

The underwater views were incredible. I couldn't wait to go snorkeling.

— Allen I. Moore

small cafe in a jungle clearing. Nearby in a small zoo are the two biggest crocodiles in captivity, Oscar, 24 feet long and Cassius, 19 feet long. They were caught out at sea in trawl nets, just like a scene from the movie "Jaws."

After re-embarking and sailing a few more miles, we reached the outer reef, where a huge pontoon was anchored. This had a restaurant on-board and landing slips for numerous vessels. A glass-bottom boat took us over the reef.

The underwater views were incredible. I couldn't wait to go snorkeling. We met a Canadian couple from Edmonton, but the wives, after seeing Oscar and Cassius, elected not to snorkel, but to view the reef from a semi-submersible boat. They missed a fabulous experience.

As we dived, we saw a technicolor display of vivid coral peacocks under the crystal water, a quiet beautiful world full of strange shapes and shades. We swam a few inches below the ocean's surface, watching neon-like fish through the clear glass facemasks. It is an amazing experience.

These remarkably beautiful, but indifferent, creatures seem to regard snorkelers as merely other aquatic beings. They swim above and beside us, or below us.

Some of the exotic names are quite descriptive: red emperor, parrot, clown, sweetlip, barramundi, nargol and sailfish. Swimming with them in 80-degree ocean water gave

the impression of being inside a huge aquarium.

We saw giant clams on ledges among the coral 10 or 12 feet below us. We dove down, following the tour guide through the schools of tropical fish. We touched the clams by hand-stroking their insides, then withdrew FAST before their three-foot mouths

clamped shut. It created quite an adrenaline rush.

Although it was early May, during the southern hemisphere's autumn season, the temperature was in the high 80s. The blazing tropical sun, high in the clear blue sky, illuminated

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This is a coral formation on Australia's Great Barrier Outer Reef. When Allen Moore went snorkeling there, he entertained himself by sticking his hand in a clam, tickling the inside, and pulling it out before the crustacean could bite him.

reader's report