

TRAVEL

# Busy Guangzhou is noisy, crowded and fun

BY JIM RADEBAUGH  
SPECIAL WRITER

With a population approaching 10 million, constant traffic jams, and an insupportable din of construction, Guangzhou, once known as Canton, can be a lot of fun.

Walk though the city's convoluted streets and you'll see hordes of hawkers selling everything from brassieres to bundles of live frogs, the latter being tied together with string. (And if you stick around, you'll probably see some of the poor creatures skinned alive.)

You'll pass countless restaurants with stacks of cages out front, some holding long black snakes, some holding chickens, ducks or an occasional kitten.

Get out in the morning and you'll see the city's elderly practicing tai chi in the parks and on the walkways along the Pearl River. And you'll probably pass a free-lance barber or two giving haircuts on the sidewalk: a folding chair, a mirror tied to a tree, a pair of manual clippers . . . and they're in business.

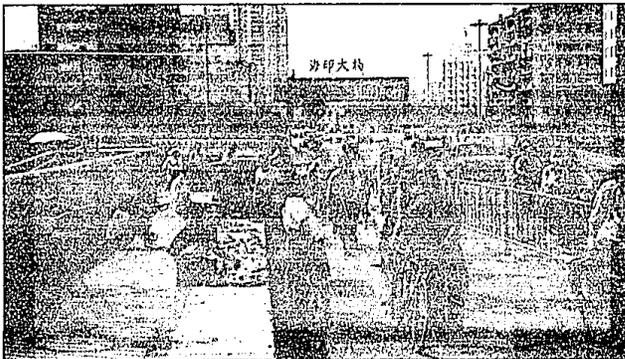
As you walk, you might note some of the things being transported by motorcycle: the carcass of a freshly slaughtered pig, a cage full of chickens, a family of four . . .

A two-hour bus ride from Hong Kong, Guangzhou (pronounced Guang Jo) is the largest city in Guangdong province, the relatively small area in southeast China. It's one of China's richest and most rapidly developing cities and it's captivated Joshua Kenny, an American from Madison, Wis., who has been living in China for more than a year.

"It's the most exciting and interesting city I've ever been in," Kenny says.

While admitting that as a tourist destination Guangzhou doesn't compare with Beijing, with its palaces, monuments and the Great Wall, or Shanghai, which is reclaiming its reputation as the Paris of the Orient, Kenny insists that Guangzhou has its own charm. It's found, he says, in the traditional brick buildings that still line many of the smaller streets and in the openness of the Cantonese people, who speak to foreigners much more readily than people in the north.

"In Guangzhou, if you walk down the side streets, it's very different from what you see on the big avenues," he explains.



For sale: Hawkers selling everything from socks to batteries to tissue paper line the sidewalks of Guangzhou.

PHOTOS BY JIM RADEBAUGH

"It's certainly more traditional, less Western. There's also a kind of street culture. You can buy your food on the street, you meet your neighbors, you sit out front and talk to them."

Kenny, 23, came to China as an English teacher, and it's teaching that has enabled him to stay long enough to get to know Guangzhou, its people and its language as well as to travel to other parts of the country.

After graduating from college last year with a degree in Spanish and linguistics, Kenny got his first teaching job: a 10-month assignment at Shantou University in Shantou city. Afterwards, he came to Guangzhou and found a job teaching with a for-profit school that specializes in teaching English to the Chinese employees of multinational companies doing business here.

That school, ALTEC, is run by Chris Barclay, who grew up in East Lansing and is a 1986 graduate of the Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills.

Barclay, 31, started the school in 1995 with his wife, May, who is Chinese. Today, there are branches in several of China's major cities.

Barclay predicts that the demand for English training — and for English teachers — will remain strong despite the faltering

Asian economy.

But he warns that people interested in teaching here must be qualified. That means having a college degree and, preferably, professional certification, he says. It also means being adaptable, culturally sensitive and having some overseas work experience, preferably in Asia, he adds.

"So I can see the person has some exposure to another culture," he explains. "It doesn't mean the person will be a good teacher, but at least I don't have to worry that they'll freak out when they get here."

Surprisingly, perhaps, being able to speak Chinese is not a qualification. ALTEC's students are almost all college graduates who have studied English for 11 years. They're able to communicate with their teachers and don't need basic instruction. They need practice using the language and help learning English idioms and business-related vocabulary.

All the same, Kenny says that the experience of teaching in China will be far richer if the teacher makes an effort to learn the local language. He studied Mandarin, China's official language, for a year in college and has studied Cantonese since he's been here.

One of the hazards of teaching in China, he says, is that students here treat their teachers as "respected guests," building a wall of formality between the teachers and the culture they've come to explore.

"I think that whether or not you speak Chinese it's difficult to

break out of that 'respected guest' role," he says. "But if you don't speak Chinese, I think it's almost impossible."

Like Kenny, Helen Yau taught at a university before joining ALTEC. Born in Louth, England, to Chinese parents, she came to China, she says, to discover her heritage.

She's managed to travel widely despite her teaching responsibilities, working in trips to some of China's most beautiful attractions.

For natural beauty, Yau, 28,

Where can you get more information about teaching overseas?

The Internet is a great place to start. Dave's ESL Cafe ([www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/eslcafe.html](http://www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/eslcafe.html)) is an especially good site. It offers practical information for those already teaching English as a second language and job listings for those seeking employment. There are usually several postings for jobs in China and elsewhere in Asia as well as throughout the world.

recommends the Wuling mountains in Hunan province. With their craggy peaks and evergreens, they evoke scenes from countless Chinese paintings.

She also recommends a trip to the distant city Xiehe, in Gansu province near the center of the country. The main attraction is the Labrang Monastery, a nearly 300-year-old Buddhist monastery that Yau says is magnificent despite the visitors who flock there.

"It's magical," she says. "You have English menus, which spoils it a bit, but it's still so wonderful."

Of course, China's greatest attraction is the Great Wall, which can be reached by taxi from Beijing. Kenny visited the ancient structure last winter on a quick trip to Beijing — what the Chinese call "Seeing flowers from the back of a horse" — and

says it lives up to the hype.

But to get some insight into today's China, he recommends visiting Chairman Mao's tomb in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. There, the preserved remains of the man who created the modern Chinese state are on display. "I think you see more of the social control," Kenny says. "They keep you moving at all times, and it's dark. You're having an experience that is much more geared to the Chinese tourist than to the foreign tourist."

Of course, not everyone who comes to Guangzhou feels a need to see all of China in a year or two, or even at all. Lisa Stouffer, another ALTEC teacher, came here eight years ago, aside from a couple of trips home to the U.S., she's done very little traveling.

A former nurse from Salina, Kansas, Stouffer, 33, speaks Cantonese fluently and says that her home, her best friends, and, indeed, her life are all right here in Guangzhou. She plans to stay for at least the next 20 years.

Not that it's always easy. She admits that sometimes while spending more than an hour on a bus just to buy a few groceries, she misses being able to drive to a shopping center. But, she says, that's part of what makes her life here more meaningful.

"In your own country, you get in your own little rut, you take things for granted," she says. "But here you can't do that."

Jim Radebaugh is a former Observer & Eccentric reporter now living and teaching in China.



Lively city: Sha Mian Island (left) is a relatively tranquil neighborhood in frenetic Guangzhou, where (right) bicycles make their way through the narrow streets of Guangzhou.

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