

Area travelers hit China at just the right moment

(Part 1 of 2 parts)
BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

No fortune cookie foretold that we would be so lucky.

We made our reservations for China last spring, with no inkling we'd be there as the country celebrated its 50th anniversary as the People's Republic of China.

But there we were in Beijing from Sept. 25-30 watching the city-wide preparations for the Oct. 1 extravaganza in Tiananmen Square.

And there we were in Tiananmen Square on the last day it was open to the public.

And there we were in Xian (pronounced Shee-on) on Oct. 1, where in 1974 farmers accidentally discovered thousands of life-size terra cotta figures guarding the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang (248 BC-209 BC).

We took time out to watch China show off its military and cultural might. The pomp and circumstance seemed generally confined to Beijing, but was televised to the nation in its entirety.

Beijing prepared for this celebration as you would for an important party at your home. The government spent months and millions getting its house and grounds in order.

Officials had a big job, since



Anniversary decorations: Workers water a pillar of flowers with a dragon. It was part of the 50th anniversary celebration decorations in Beijing.

this city of 12 million in both heavily polluted and in obvious transition between old and new, architecturally, economically and politically.

Our Chinese guide detailed some of the preparations: the 25 largest industrial polluters were shut down for a month; the polluted city most was completely drained and newly filled with water; prostitutes and beggars were rounded up and removed from the city center; roads were built and the new airport was timed to open for domestic flights; workers were given a seven-day vacation; people from outside Beijing were told to stay home to avoid further traffic congestion; entry to Tiananmen Square to watch the festivities was by invitation only.

We saw for ourselves the millions of flowers arranged throughout the city, most in pots rather than actual plantings; a couple hundred school children practicing for the festivities in a plaza near our hotel; the night-time fireworks.

And in Tiananmen Square itself, we watched as the red carpet was laid, the thousands of VIP seats installed and the last-minute potted flowers arranged.

On the last night before the square was closed to the public the traffic was unimaginable. Everyone wanted to see what he could only view on television from then on. We had tickets for the Beijing Opera, without realizing how close it was to Tiananmen.



Famous landmark: A 50th anniversary sign adorns the front of the Temple of Heaven, Beijing.

Although we had no trouble getting a taxi back to our hotel - that didn't mean a whole lot, since no one in the sea of cars, bikes and pedestrian traffic could move more than a few feet at a time.

Talk about a slow boat to China! The diesel fumes from the buses all around us didn't help the situation.

Still, you couldn't help but be caught up in the excitement - and the hope, expressed openly by a number of Chinese to us, that government repression is on the wane.

But even if we hadn't been there for "China at 50" as the cover of Time Magazine's Oct. 11 issue headlined, Beijing would have both captivated and perplexed us.

If you had been in Beijing 15 years ago, as one member of our tour group had, you wouldn't recognize it. At that time, she brought her own food and was completely restricted as to where she could travel. She had to use tourist money as opposed to the Chinese yuan, and people dressed in dull-colored, Mao-style clothing.

Shangri-La

By contrast, we stayed in a world class hotel (the Shangri-La) where both Western and Chinese food was available (an Italian restaurant was one of the choices).

Although our tour was led by a government guide, we wandered at will through the streets whenever we had free time. And both our yuan and dollars were not

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only accepted, but solicited by often over-zealous souvenir sellers.

We saw only a handful of old people wearing the Mao uniform. Women bicycle to work in high heels and bright blouses; men wear sport shirts and slacks, if not jackets.

Contrasts

Towering high rises and gaudy neon signs are juxtaposed against dimly lit, dilapidated, nondescript apartment houses and the walled, old city neighborhoods, known as hutongs.

Even within the last several years, the cityscape has changed. Our tour manager, Richard Neale from New Zealand, continually said: "That's new, it wasn't here last year." And Alice, our local tour guide, continually pointed out: "That opened last month ... that opened last week ... that opened yesterday."

Next week: Part 2, The Great Wall, Forbidden City, and other wonders of mainland China.

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On patrol: A military presence is conspicuous in Tiananmen Square a few days before the state anniversary celebration.



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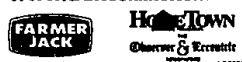
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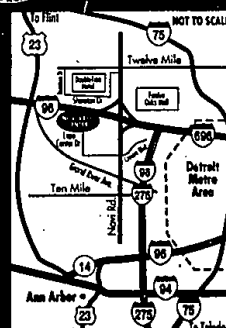
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