

# Travel Scene



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crossroads

**Iris Jones**

## Snakeman immune to temple viper bites

Hussian bin Mat has been at the snake temple in Penang, Malaysia, for 40 years. He has been bitten by the snake vipers at least fifty times. "They are gentle in the temple. They don't bite hard."

I did not see Hussian when I walked up the stairs, between the market stalls, to Sungal Ara, but I knew the story of the snake temple. An Englishman named David Brown had a mysterious ailment, incurable until he visited a Chinese doctor and was treated with herbs. In thanks, Brown gave land to build a temple, but as construction progressed the pit vipers from adjoining jungle began to fill the temple site.

The construction crew tried to chase them away but the snakes kept coming back, so the crew decided that the gods had sent them. The snakes were meant to be there.

The temple, like all Taoist temples I have seen in southeast Asia, is a vision in red and gold. You enter it to the smell of joss sticks and you may be so mesmerized that you do not see the snakes coiled on two dried tree branches at the back of the altar.

Hussian and a woman were standing beside a bank of names. I like to check for misadventures American names when I travel, so I signed up, gave a small donation and heard a man's voice.

"Would you like to see the maternity ward?" Hussian bin Mat pointed to a space behind the altar where a very large and lumpy pregnant snake reposed on a branch, with a chicken egg nearby as food.

I followed Hussian into another room, where many snakes were the color of a young green banana, and to another room, where a photograph had marked defanged snakes with red to show they were harmless. You are supposed to wrap these snakes around your neck while the photographer takes your picture. I declined.

It was in the temple garden, where a 15-year-old boy was dragging snakes out of a bush with a long pole, that I asked Hussian if he had ever been bitten.

"Very gentle," he said. "Only soft mouth. But poisonous?"

Kill in ten minutes," he said.

That's also when I learned that Hussian, who was born Malay and therefore a Moslem, had come to the snake temple with Chinese friends a young man, and had been there ever since. Nobody pay me," he said.

You don't get paid?"

Tourists pay me."

Aha. "You've been bitten?"

He showed me his index finger, permanently bent out of shape.

"A snake did that?"

"He was a fresh snake and nobody told me."

Hussian said. "A lady found it in a tree and brought it in, but nobody told me it was fresh from a tree! The snakes in the temple, they are very gentle, they brush by you or if you put your finger in their mouth, they don't really bite."

"How many times have you been bitten?"

"At least 50 times."

"Why aren't you dead?"

"I'm immune!"

If you can believe what is told, no worshipper has ever been bitten by the temple snakes. The Taoists don't worship the snakes, of course. They worship Choe Soo Kong.

The nearby jungle is gone now, so there are only about 30 snakes in the temple, plus those in Hussian's "maternity ward." On special days, such as the day of the Goddess of Mercy, they must bring snakes in from the "fresh trees."

## Clean shavers fill Freak Street

(AP) — Twenty years have changed the Eden Hotel, which called itself the "oldest and favorite shop in town serving the best Nepalese hash." Now it caters to clean-shaven trekkers.

The ready availability of hashish at the Eden and nearby establishments, and the bearded, long-haired Westerners who bought it, earned Jhochhen Road the nickname Freak Street.

Although the hashish and flower children are gone a generation later, along with the Eden posters saying "Let us take you higher," Jhochhen Road is still known as Freak Street.

Nepal has outlawed the sale of drugs and the Eden now serves a credible approximation of European cuisine to Western tourists who happen by. About 150,000 visit Nepal each year.

Hippies have given way to trippies, says the Insight Guide to Nepal, and there is "rarely a whiff of ill-lit smoke, and not a bare breast to be seen in public."

Many trekkers prefer Thamel, a district for budget travelers about a mile to the north, where such amenities as private baths and hot water are easier to find than on Freak Street.

TIMES HAVE changed, but the old ones linger in many minds.

Chaitanya Lal Srestha, a doctor who uses the initials W.F. (for World Famous) before his name, remembers the visitors of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"So many of them came to me for cures," he said in an interview at his clinic, a tiny, ill-ventilated alcove lined with herbs in glass bottles. "I



GERRY FORSTER

From a bus in Tiananmen Square, students are seen storming the square, demonstrating their plight against communism. Tiananmen is the largest public square in the world and is reported to hold one million people. The square was filled in May and June 1989.

## IN MEMORY OF TIANANMEN SQUARE

June 4 marks the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. This story serves to remind us of the 600 students who were killed by military troops who were ordered by Chinese government officials to end the two month-long demonstrations in which students rallied for democracy in China.

By Gerry Forster  
special writer

Last spring, I traveled to China with 39 other students to see what it is like on the other side of the world. Since we were members of a Chinese/American Educational Exchange program, we stayed mainly on college campuses in small towns where we could take classes and talk with students and professors. The primary goal of our trip was to learn more about Chinese history and culture.

During the time I was in China the student demonstrations were taking place in Tiananmen Square. In class, our professors discussed political events freely. They told us the students were asking for two things:

First, they wanted better paying jobs when they graduated. A doctor, for example, makes the same money as a peddler. While the peasants are better off than ever before, the professional class feels it is not being treated fairly.

The second demand was for political reform. Throughout its history, China has never had a tradition of government elected by the people. Now, in the wake of modernization, many are calling for a new system which will allow the people to have a say in who runs their government.

Last May, as the situation heated up and martial law was declared, we returned to Beijing. A week earlier the city had been calm, but now as we pulled into the train station the air was electric. Hundreds of young men were scrambling in and out of train windows and pushing through doorways. The streets were jammed with thousands of students converging on Tiananmen Square from all directions, carrying red cloth banners and shouting slogans. The streets were so mobbed that our bus couldn't move, so there was nothing we could do but sit there for several hours right in the middle of it all. Mr. Soong cautioned us, as foreigners, to stay completely neutral.

It was now the fourth day since the students had begun their hunger strike in the square and many were beginning to pass out from dehydration. All night long we heard the ambulances going by our hotel carrying students to the hospital. As one group of students collapsed, a new group would march in to take their place.

THE NEXT night, seven of us decided to go down to the Square and see for ourselves what was going on. Tiananmen is the largest public square in the world and reputed to hold one million people. Surely, there were a million people in the square that night and thousands more spilling over into the adjoining side streets. These moving bodies were packed so densely there wasn't a crack we could squeeze through to try to inch our way closer to the action. From somewhere ahead in the milling shadows, I could faintly make out the sound of a loudspeaker and intermittent cheers. I could also make

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GERRY FORSTER

China is a land determined to "rise off its knees and walk on two legs."

## China: another world through a deep hole

By Gerry Forster  
special writer

"If you could dig straight through the center of the earth," my mother once said, "you would come out in China."

As a child, we used to try to do that. A smile of recognition crossed the face of Mr. Liu, one of our Chinese hosts, when I told him this.

"The children in China try to dig through the earth to America," he said.

During my trip to China with the Chinese/American Educational Exchange program, we were determined to learn more about Chinese history and culture.

We joined our professors for Tai Chi before breakfast every morning, took classes until noon and then were taken on excursions in the afternoons. We ate our meals with chop sticks in the school dining rooms and noted the guesthouse rules posted in our rooms: "No spitting in the corners," "No putting dirty things on the floor," and "No committing adultery."

I look some used college textbooks as gifts for the universities where we stayed and our hosts were touchingly grateful. They told us most of their books had been burned during the "cultural revolution."

We visited the Forbidden City, once the home of China's emperors, and we climbed the Great Wall, which according to the guidebook is the only man-made object

that can be seen from the moon. We floated down the silent, fog-enshrouded Li River and took a boat up the bustling Grand Canal. We marveled at the terra cotta warriors of Xian and visited a Buddhist temple high up in the mountains where we heard the monks chanting to the accompaniment of strange, clanging bells. But my most enduring memory of China is the people.

CHINA, a country about the size of the United States, contains one-fourth of all the earth's people, yet only one-seventh of its land is suitable for growing food. In the south where the climate is good, the soil is not fertile and in the north the soil is fertile but there isn't enough rain.

For centuries the Chinese have lived with the specter of starvation. Food is still so important that people greet one another with "Have you eaten?" rather than "How are you?"

But the China I saw was well fed and well clothed. It is a land determined to rise off its knees and as their slogan goes, "Walk on two legs."

Tackling the housing problem is the biggest priority now and in every city, we saw huge cranes erecting new high rise apartment buildings so that the centuries old hovels can be torn down. "The crane is the national bird of China," Mr. Liu joked.

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The Chinese believe that you are not a man until you have climbed the Great Wall.

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