

TRAVEL

Great Wall really is larger-than-life sight

(Second of a 2-part series)

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

On our full 17-day tour of China we saw more larger-than-life sights than I've experienced in any other country. Three are in the Beijing area: The Great Wall, the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square.

The others are the terra cotta soldiers at Xian, the Three Gorges Dam, and the Yangtze River itself. (These wonders will have to be the subject of a future article.)

The Great Wall, widely advertised as the only man-made structure visible from space, was just as moving close up. We saw it from Mutianyu, about 45 miles from Beijing, where a Japanese-built cable car takes you on a scenic ride, depositing you within reach of the highest restored section. It's still a short, but steep climb to the top, where unfortunately a blasting loud-speaker and souvenir hawkers greet you. But it's possible to move down a few yards to find the serenity to contemplate this man-made wonder of the world.

Originally built in small sections by individual feudal states during the 6th Century BC, the Great Wall was connected at the end of the 3rd Century BC on orders of Emperor Qin when he unified China. The enormity of the task - the wall runs for 3,000 miles - is almost unimaginable.

On the same day, we stopped at the Ming tombs, where 13 of 16 Ming emperors are buried. We entered from the Avenue of Animals, a tree-lined path flanked by whimsical pairs of

stone animals and courtesans leading to the excavated tomb of Ming Emperor Wan Li (1627-1620). Legend has it that they were erected to save the dead emperor and his wives from danger in the afterlife. Other imperial tombs in this area remain unexcavated.

We re-viewed the film "The Last Emperor" shortly before we left for China.

But still we weren't prepared for the Forbidden City. Twenty-four emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties lived within its red walls, which until 1911 was the center of the Chinese world.

The square, flat architecture, the symmetry of its courtyards within courtyards, the treeless (nothing should be more imposing than the emperor), flat 200 acres are bisected by the Imperial Path, along which only the emperor could travel.

Halls, pavilions, palaces and courtyards comprising the Forbidden City were built between 1406 and 1420 by 200,000 men, we were told. Only the palace, where the imperial family resided, survived war and fire. The other buildings have been rebuilt, restored and repainted many times, maintaining the original design.

We visited Tiananmen Square, considered the heart of China, twice. Our 24-year-old guide, usually very open, brushed off a question about where in the square the 1989 conflict between students and soldiers took place.

Of the building which houses Chairman Mao Zedong's tomb, closed while we were there, she said: "Only the old people go there. The young people don't

like him."

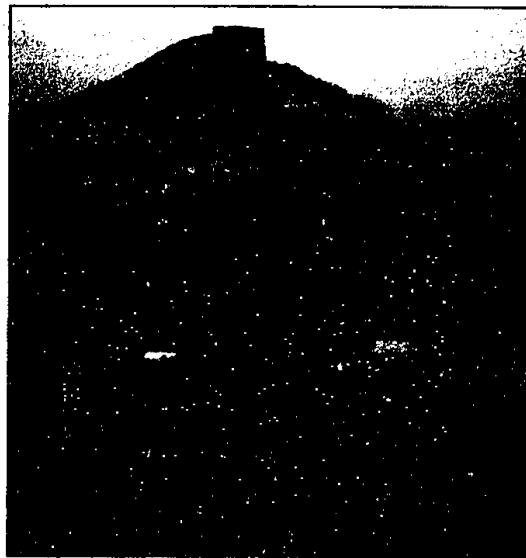
In Beijing, we rode in a rickshaw, visited a traditional Chinese home in the hutong and a nearby elementary school, toured the Summer Palace, the Temple of Heaven (the most famous temple in China) and Beihai Park. The latter was where we enjoyed lunch, on our own, at the illustrious Fangshan restaurant. According to Fodor's: "Established in 1926 by three royal chefs, Fangshan serves dishes once prepared by Qing emperors based on recipes garnered from across China."

We stumbled through a pre-set meal of a dozen dishes, with some help from a Chinese woman at an adjoining table.

The Chinese people are generally friendly, but seemed the most reserved in Beijing. I had a halting conversation with a young Chinese woman in the health club locker room of my hotel. She was eager to try out her English, to trade e-mail addresses, and proudly told me she had just hooked up to Yahoo. But when I began asking her questions about political issues, she clammed up.

We weren't friendless in a foreign land, however. Arriving a day earlier than our tour group, we were greeted by a large blue and gold University of Michigan poster in the lobby of our hotel. It turned out that a U-M alumni travel group had arrived a day ahead of us.

On that tour were Paul and Ruth Kadish of Farmington Hills, who are friends of friends, as well as former West Bloomfield residents Jim and Ann Beuerle, who now live in Suttons



Impressive: Judith Doner Berne pauses on the steps of The Great Wall. They say The Great Wall is the only man-made object you can see from space.

Bay. The food in China is built around fresh vegetables, and either noodles or rice, depending on the region, and the sauces are a lot lighter than here. We didn't eat off the street or from the markets, which in addition to abundant fruits and vegetables

featured delicacies such as live snakes, pigs ears and more entrails than I know existed.

In Beijing desserts looked a lot better than they tasted. I never saw orange sherbet, the dessert staple of Chinese restaurants in the U.S.

And nowhere in China did I

see anything resembling a fortune cookie.

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