

CULTURE IS THE SOUL OF TRAVEL

CHINA: the Soul of Culture

by Lori Kenner

Landscape on the river, Fenghuang, Hunan, China

Lori and Keith at the Summer Palace Beijing



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Tourism in China is absolutely exploding! Why? Hard to believe but China as a tourist destination has been open for less than 40 years.



Lori and Keith at Mutianyu Great Wall

IT WAS IN THE LATE 1970'S THAT THE GENERAL PUBLIC COULD VISIT CHINA FOR TOURISM. CHINA IS VERY DIVERSE. YOU CAN VISIT ANCIENT CITIES, CRUISE ON A RIVER, VISIT THE BEACH, TREK IN THE MOUNTAINS AND SO MUCH MORE.

While the culture is very different and the language still a barrier in many areas, Chinese people are very welcoming to Westerners coming to visit and traveling for Westerners has become much more comfortable and affordable.

My husband Keith and I have just returned from a fabulous trip through 4 very different regions of China.

Beijing was the first city we visited and it was amazing just landing at the airport and stepping into the terminal you immediately felt that you were a world away from home. Although many signs have English, the majority of all written signs are in Chinese.

Beijing was a city filled with so much history. We walked around Tiananmen Square where masses of people congregate near the entrance to the Forbidden City. This was the sacred center of the Chinese empire for 500 years and home to both the Ming and Qing dynasties. There are beautiful pavilions and living quarters to view, courtyards and beautiful architecture.

We took a rickshaw ride through the Hutongs which are these cool, very authentic courtyard residential areas built along narrow streets. Then, we dined in a home and enjoyed authentic cuisine.

Until you visit the Great Wall, you can't imagine the size of it! We climbed and walked for miles. We visited an

area called Mutianyu, which you reach the via chairlift or Gondola. What an exhilarating experience!

Our visit to the Summer Palace was one of the highlights in Beijing! This was the retreat for the emperors during the Ming and Qing dynasties and the also known as the "Den of the Dragon Lady" It is an absolute wonderfully beautiful and relaxing spot to stroll and people watch. The Temple of Heaven has a beautiful park where you can watch locals playing cards, chess, sword dancing and practicing Tai Chi.

We flew to Xi'an. This city has so much more than the Terracotta Warriors. It is a "small" city of only 8 million, compared to 21 million in Beijing and 24 million in Shanghai. Located on the banks of the Yellow River, it was the starting point for the famous trade route, the Silk Road-the caravan passageway where silks, ceramics, and spices were carried which led to an exchange of cultures, technologies and ideas.

The Muslim Quarter is a bustling market of street vendors and pedestrians leading to the Great Mosque which is a mixture of Chinese and Arabic/Muslim art and architecture. Our famous Xi'an dumpling dinner included 18 different dumplings!

We flew to Chongqing and enjoyed a Yangtze River Cruise to Yichang. Century River Cruises was really great. It is a Chinese company and caters to Chinese as well as Westerners from the U.S., Europe and other areas. They have authentic Chinese cuisine as well as Western Food and shared culture and traditions with us which was so cool. Uniworld and Avalon River Cruises use this line for their China River Cruises because the line is so great. The Century Legend was built in 2013 and you can enjoy amenities you would find on ocean cruises such as a pool, gym, kids program, lounge and more. The cabins were so spacious with full baths and showers and all of the cabins have balconies!

Our final spot was my favorite, Shanghai! Shanghai while still being clearly Chinese, was similar to Metropolitan cities such as New York, Paris and more. The skylines of the city are spectacular!

We stayed at The Park Hyatt located within The Shanghai World Financial Center, a building nicknamed the "Bottle Opener" because of the hole cut out in the top. Talk about views! There was much more English spoken as well as many more Western toilets,

lol. We visited the "Old Town", Yuan Bazaar filled with cobblestone streets and traditional shops selling herbal medicines, handcrafts and snacks

A visit to Shanghai wouldn't be complete without a stroll along the Bund, Shanghai's former Wall Street which houses a collection of beautiful buildings which were the early trade houses from the 1850s to the 1920s.

An evening cruise on the Huangpu River with Shanghai lit up in full color was so memorable.

There are cool cities such as Suzhou and Hangzhou which make for great day trips if you want to make Shanghai your base.

Suzhou is known as the "Venice of the East". It is filled with ancient gardens and canals and the classical architecture is the gem of this city.

The Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai, built between 1911 and 1918 is not famed for its architecture but for the two Buddhas housed within. People come daily and pray at all times and the Buddhas are quite impressive. We even got to visit the Jewish Synagogue Museum..

Two weeks in China is probably the minimum time you would want to spend and we only had time to visit the cities mentioned. There is so much more but it will be a trip so fascinating and memorable. ●

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