

China

TEXT & PHOTOS BY MURIEL FEINER



The always busy Tiananmen Square (Gate of Heavenly Peace) in central Beijing with a photo of former president, Mao Zedong.

The fact that China is the largest country in the world and the most populated and one of the oldest civilizations makes for the most extraordinary contrasts and proof of this is its three major tourist destinations: Xian, Beijing and Shanghai; representing in this order, the Past, the Present and the Future of this amazing country.

A couple in traditional costume in Funghui.



Beijing

The Present is clearly Beijing, the capital city, where a visitor is inevitably drawn first to Tiananmen Square, meaning “Gate of Heavenly Peace”, as symbolic of Beijing, as Times Square is of New York. To the West of Tiananmen, which is reportedly the largest square in the world, is the Great Hall of the People and to the south, the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, the first leader of the People’s Republic of China, who ruled the country from 1949 until his death in 1976. The 440,000 m² plaza is alive with activity: whole families, school children, masses of Chinese tourists, foreigners, souvenir vendors, marching soldiers . . .

A short walk away is the entrance to The Forbidden City, the huge complex of buildings, palaces and pavilions which was home to the Emperors of China for

over 500 years, under the Ming and Qing dynasties. It is—once again—the world’s largest surviving palace in the world and so visitors should schedule sufficient time for a leisurely visit. Built between 1406 and 1420, it covers 72 hectares and 980 buildings have survived from its original magnificence. UNESCO declared The Forbidden City a World Heritage Site in 1987 and it is indeed the best example of traditional Chinese architecture.

The Summer Palace or Yijie Yuan, which means “Gardens of Nurtured Harmony”, on the other side of the city, is the largest and best conserved of all the imperial palatial gardens. The Summer Palace consists of the man-made Kunming Lake, measuring 2.2 sq kms, and the earth excavated from the ground to create the lake was used to build the 60 m high Longevity Mountain. In 1998, it also joined UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites and it is an excellent model of classic Chinese landscaping and garden design, where one can view the famous Marble Boat and the Temple of Heaven, where the Emperors



Construction on The Great Wall began in 5BC.

performed their sacrificial rituals in order to beg the gods for a good harvest.

The piece de resistance of any trip to China is, of course, one of the Seven Wonders of the World: the Great Wall. These defensive ramparts extend for 6,350 kms and if we include its diverse ramifications it would total 8,851 km., from Shanhauguan in the East to Lop Nur in the West. Construction was begun in the 5th century BC and continued until the 16th century in order to protect the country's northern borders against invasion. There are several exits off the main highway to visit the Wall, but perhaps the most impressive is the second one, as you leave Beijing, Badaling, for it is where the largest section of wall is visible, amidst the rugged mountainous landscape. However, as it is very popular among visitors, there is usually a long, slow-moving line to reach the parking area. Once your vehicle is settled in, the "easier" section to climb is the one which forks off to the right and if you follow the trail long enough, you can reach a magnificent vantage point, from which to admire the impressive scenery and

The lake at the Palace of Tranquility.



even find a local artisan who will engrave your name on a plaque to confirm the feat of "having climbed a significant portion of the China Wall".

Xian

In Xian, one must visit the Grand Mosque and the bustling labyrinth of alleyways making up the Moslem quarter surrounding the temple. In the more modern part of town and located approximately half a kilometer from one another are the Drum and Bell Towers which were sounded every day: Huge drums announced Daybreak to the local populace and old bronze bells, Sundown.

The 200 foot high Big Wild Goose Pagoda or Dayna Ta was built in 652 during the reign of Emperor Gaozong at the center of the Temple of Grace to house all the treasures of the Tang dynasty.

Xian is, of course, most famous for its Terracotta Warriors, which represent one of the greatest archaeological finds of the 20th century. Dating back to 246 B.C and taking 11 years to build, the amazing Terracotta Army, made up of 7,000 life-sized figures, was put up to guard the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang and they have serviced their leader well, for to this day his actual remains and the treasures and relics reportedly buried with him have never actually been found. This extraordinary army is made up of thousands of individually crafted, life-size foot soldiers, each one depicted with totally different facial features, and they are surrounded by chariots, wagons, horses, weaponry and even child soldiers. The Terracotta Warriors stand in millenary formation and extend over a surface area of 16,300 square meters divided into three pits and

it is an ongoing archaeological excavation site.

Although Xian is world famous for its Terracotta Army, if there is time, one should also visit the nearby Banpo excavations of a Neolithic Village dated in around 4,500 BC and the Huaquing Imperial Resort, with its mineral-rich hot springs.

Shanghai

The futuristic Shanghai is an incredible city, seemingly right out of a sci-fi movie. With its 20,000,000 inhabitants, living in a surface area of 6,218 km², it is the largest city in China. Its name comes from Shang which means "up" and Hai which means "sea" and it is located at the mouth of the Yangtze river. Construction has had to spread vertically rather than horizontally and for this reason



Xian's Terracotta Warriors: 7,000 life size figures

the city can boast of more than 3,000 skyscrapers, buildings which are defined in China as having have more than 50 floors.

To a great extent the financial hub of the country, Shanghai requires two airports and modern Metro and Bullet train services to move its residents and visitors around. Filled with endless activity, it is where East meets West, the Modern merges with the Traditional, the most National with the International.

Perhaps now is a great time to plan a visit to Shanghai, coinciding with the World Expo 2010, whose motto will be *A Better City, A Better Life*.

The Expo, will be the first such Exhibition to be held in a so-called developing country and it will count on the participation of 193 countries. The inauguration date for Shanghai's Expo is set for May 1, 2010 and it

will remain open to the public until October 31, 2010.

Not to be missed on a visit to Shanghai is the beautiful city of Suzhou, to the northwest of the provincial capital, a charming ancient city and the cradle of the Wu culture, sprawling out around its picturesque canal. It is famous for its handmade silk and a tour and “shopping spree” in one of its local factories is highly recommended.

Hangzhou, to the south, is also worth a visit with a boat ride on the West Lake, a tour to the Dragon Well Tea Plantation and a stroll along the historical Hefang Street. Also to the southwest and nearby is the ancient water town of Fengjing, over 1,500 years old, which the local tourism board has carefully restored and turned into a charming tourist attraction and a photographer’s paradise..

After touring the Shanghai History Museum, which offers a very clever and fascinating recreation of two thousand years of life and events in China, a visit to the city would not be complete without a cruise on the Huangpu River, in order to obtain yet another perspective of the city and the Pudong quarter, which has to be



China is a country steeped in cultural activity such as dance and theatre.

complemented with the spectacular view from the top of the SWFC, the Shanghai World Financial Center. Prior to January 4, 2010, when the 892 m high Burj Khalifa building was inaugurated in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, the SWFC was officially proclaimed

the tallest building in the world, rising 828 meters into the air.

Indeed China is a fascinating country – a land rich in history, culture, beauty and contrasts.

MURIEL FEINER



A cruise down the Huangpu River in the ultra modern city of Shanghai.