

China trip report – May 2015

This is a report about our trip to China, which – from reading the dossier – we expected to be our most adventurous holiday to date. The dossier warned us that “... participants must be determined, adventurous, and willing to put up with the rigours and discomforts inherent in travel at high altitude in remote and culturally alien areas ...”, but actually it was easier going than we had expected. As mentioned below, it helped that we were very fortunate with the weather.

The trip was put together by Gerald, our Belgian tour guide friend, and he invited his regular clients to join him. There were eight: Shirley and Joan, sisters from Derbyshire, Brent and Brenda from Vancouver Island, Frank and Ria from Belgium and us. The local guide was Jesper Hornskov, a Dane who settled in Beijing after marrying a Chinese lady many years ago. He appears to speak Chinese (Mandarin) like a native, which was vital as we met very few English-speakers on our travels, even in the airports.

Where we went

We used the word “adventurous” above for a good reason. We were travelling to a part of China that few Westerners – indeed few Chinese – ever visit. We were in Qinghai province, which borders the Tibet Autonomous Region (which is, of course, anything but autonomous). So we were not quite in Tibet politically (most important), but we were in Tibet geographically, on the vast plateau to the north of the Himalayas. Tibet itself is frequently out of bounds to Westerners, often at little or no notice. The Chinese annexed Tibet in 1950, and have systemically been trying to eliminate its separate identity. This has involved improving the road network, building a railway to link it to Beijing and Shanghai, and shipping in Chinese people from the East, some as settlers and others as tourists. Qinghai province lies to the North and East of Tibet, and is open to Westerners, although apparently we needed special permits even to be there (which Jesper had obtained for us). We were told under no circumstances to put Tibet onto our Chinese visa application forms. It would cause untold difficulties. So we didn't, and the untold difficulties were avoided.

Using a fleet of three Toyota Landcruisers (like Range Rovers but more comfortable), we followed a rectangular circuit of approximately 1,800 miles around the North East corner of the Tibetan Plateau. Generally we stayed in each location for only a day, although there were four occasions on which we stayed in our location for two nights each (heaven – it meant we could reorganise our stuff for the next few days in order to avoid rummaging in our cases). Apart from the first couple of days when we were acclimatising, for most of the holiday we were above 3,000m (9,850 ft) and for much of the time we were above 4,000m (13,100 ft). The highest point where we got out of the cars was a snowy pass at 4,825m (15,800 ft). One or two of the passes were even higher but we drove through them without stopping.

We needed to adjust to the altitude, which took a week or so. Some people got headaches, but generally the group had no difficulties apart from Brenda and Brent, who had arrived with colds, and they did find the altitude difficult to cope with. We were told to drink more than usual amounts of the bottled water that was provided – not very welcome advice, given that there was little vegetation to hide behind on the plateau at “convenience stops”! Fortunately all of the hotels (bar one) were modern (or relatively so) and had ensuite bathrooms. The only difficulty we encountered with the altitude was shortness of breath when climbing stairs, going uphill on our walks (of which there were many) and when taking photographs (since we discovered that we unconsciously hold our breath in order to keep the camera still, and then run out of oxygen).

We were fortunate with the weather. There were only a couple of wet days, but at high level this fell as snow, adding to the beautiful scenery. We had only one seriously rainy day (which started with snow but turned to rain at a lower altitude). For the rest of the time, we enjoyed wall-to-wall sunshine. Clear skies overnight gave us fantastic views of the stars (as there were no streetlights

outside the big cities), but it meant freezing temperatures in the morning (and very cold hotel bedrooms in a couple of instances). But as soon as the sun rose, any frost or snow melted quickly, and by mid-morning temperatures were high enough to mean that we had to start taking off layers of clothes (earlier if we were climbing up hills). Although we did experience a couple of windy days, we were not walking on the mountains on those days, so we never experienced significant windchill, which was a relief. We never required more than five layers of clothes, and on some afternoons we were down to only three layers (in fact on one sunny afternoon in a canyon Penny was down to one layer for a short time!). As in Newcastle, the locals didn't seem to feel the cold and were happily walking around in T-shirts.

A typical day would see us leave our hotel at 5.30 or 6.00 am and drive for an hour or so to a wildlife viewing stop for a picnic breakfast. Then we would walk or watch wildlife for a few hours during the day, often twice, and the rest of the day would be spent driving to the next location. The days when we did not change hotel were, in theory, more relaxed, as there was not so far to travel. In practice we just drove further to view the wildlife. We tended to arrive at the hotel in the evening between 7.00 and 8.00 pm, but it was later when the wildlife was particularly interesting. By the time we had eaten, it was not an early night. And next day, we did it all over again. For two weeks. (As one friend has said: "you call that a holiday?")

None of the places that we visited (except Xi'an, on the way home) will be known to people in the West. Our trip started in a city called Xining (pronounced She-ning, we think) which is about 2½ hours flying time east of Beijing. This alone has a population of a million people – about the size of Birmingham. One of the towns we stayed in was Yushu, which we discovered (shortly before our arrival) is notable for having – out of the blue – suffered an earthquake in 2010 that killed several thousand people. The town has been completely rebuilt in the last two or three years. We visited the memorial, which has been created from one of the damaged buildings. We couldn't read any of the labels to the exhibits but there were many photographs that showed the destruction.

What we saw

The principal purpose of the trip for most people was to see wildlife – both mammals and birds. In that, we were very successful. The key mammals we hoped to see were large, although that did not mean that they were necessarily waiting around for us to see them. Our photographs show Tibetan gazelle (ubiquitous and relatively easy to see), Tibetan antelope (with long sinuous horns – easy to see in the right place, but always at a distance), Pallas's cat (very difficult to see, so a great sighting when we got close to one) and blue sheep. The latter are the main prey of the snow leopard, but despite driving 10 miles up a remote valley and scanning for a couple of hours we were not able to find one. It's highly likely that one was watching us, however, as Gerald said that we were definitely in the right sort of terrain – the same terrain as he had been in when he saw a snow leopard in Ladakh (in India). Indeed we later discovered that the Kun Lun mountains stretch from Ladakh into the Tibetan Plateau where we were.

We also saw wolves (on 3 occasions), foxes (many times, both Red and Tibetan), Wild asses (Kiang) and various species of deer.

In terms of birds, the stars were Cranes – Black-necked cranes and also Demoiselle cranes. There were also rare pheasants, and some birds that are staggeringly local to tiny areas of Tibet. Kozlov's bunting, for example, lives only in a few remote valleys in this part of China, but Jesper knew exactly where to look for it (at the top of a mountain pass, in the snow). Probably it's been seen by only a few hundred people in the world (other than the locals). We were unsuccessful with an even rarer bird, the Tibetan sandgrouse, despite nearly all the party combing out around the desert to look for it for over two hours (Peter stayed in the car with his Kindle). There were many other species of birds, again some extremely local to the areas in which we found them. Penny

can tell you more. Peter was delighted to discover that as many as two of the six other people on the trip were not avid birders – a far higher proportion than he is accustomed to on his holidays. However many of the birds – especially the Rosefinches and Redstarts – were very colourful, and we also frequently spotted Lammergeiers (Bearded Vultures), which are very large and easily identified.

Food

Food is a very important part of any holiday for us, and Peter was slightly disappointed, particularly given China's reputation for food. He lost almost six pounds in weight, presumably from eating less than usual. The best meal of the day was always the evening meal, taken either in hotels or in restaurants local to our hotel. Every evening, Jesper ordered seven or eight different dishes for us, plus rice, to be shared between us. In the first two hotels, the surroundings were opulent and the food was exquisite. In the smaller places, the surroundings were often tatty (no complaints about that) and the food pretty ordinary. Chinese people do not eat much meat, particularly in the countryside. So nearly all the dishes were vegetarian, although a few contained small amounts of meat (except in the last town, when Jesper ordered sweet and sour pork, which we devoured with enthusiasm). There was always a bean curd dish in a spicy sauce, which Jesper must have enjoyed, as none of us did much. In contrast, Penny was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the evening meals. All were nicely flavoured (although some were a bit spicy) and there were lots of vegetables. We also managed to buy some crisps and white chocolate bars (Penny's favourite) in shops close to our hotels.

Breakfast – with one exception – was a picnic out of the back of the cars (the exception was a Chinese breakfast in a hotel, which was very disappointing indeed). The picnic breakfast varied very little and we think that most of it had been brought from Xining, where the trip started. There was always rather hard bread, cheese, hard-boiled eggs and bananas, and some people made rudimentary porridge in their mugs using oats and hot water (not to my taste). On red letter days there was Spam (really). Lunch was either the same, when we were far from civilisation, or we called into a café in a town we were passing through (to the great surprise of the locals). Although the menus were lengthy, we were always offered the same choice of a noodle dish (with varying degrees of heat), beef soup or egg soup. Egg soup was egg stirred into a vegetable broth. At its worst, it was tasteless but at best it was extremely pleasant – and very filling. Penny always ate the noodle dish (which always tasted good but was always too generous) and Peter the egg soup. The cafés all displayed food hygiene certificates – strangely categories A, B and C, in Western letters – and inevitably they were all graded C. But Jesper said that no-one had ever become ill in these places, and he was proved right on this occasion as well.

One complication was the use of chopsticks, which was in practice unavoidable. We all became quite expert in the end, but eating with chopsticks certainly reduces the speed of eating – particularly with sweetcorn kernels and peanuts. Some of the noodles were the length of spaghetti strands, which made meals something of a messy business. Although the food didn't excite us much, we were never hungry – but it is said that altitude reduces appetite, and also (as mentioned above) we were drinking much more water than usual. In fact, on returning to the UK, Penny has never felt fitter nor healthier. It was probably helped by having very little alcohol – wine was only sold at one hotel on the Tibetan Plateau – and drinking lots of water and having a mainly vegetarian diet. Perhaps we should carry on in this way!

Impressions of China

A word of caution first. China is HUGE (one in six people in the world is Chinese) and we saw only a tiny part of it, so what follows is based just on what we saw. Start with the scenery, which was Peter's main reason for joining the trip in the first place. The scenery was stunning. We had

expected vast landscapes and skies, with wildlife dotted around. We got all that, but what we hadn't anticipated was that this was interspersed with seriously high mountains. So we were constantly climbing and descending vast slopes, either in the cars or on foot. The views, as you can imagine, were superb. Some of the roads that climbed up high were both steep and long, so that the ubiquitous lorries ground their way up and down, with overturned vehicles at the foot caused (we think) by their brakes overheating or by the drivers going to sleep (long straight roads between the passes) or being affected by the altitude.

The standard of driving in the countryside was relatively good, although the lorries took great distances to overtake one another when travelling uphill. The standard of driving in the towns and cities was pure madness, and very much each person for himself.

We travelled through many types of terrain. The high mountain passes were pretty barren, and mostly snow-covered. Lower down, there was vegetation but we were very early in the year and so the grasses and wildflowers had not yet started to grow. In the valleys, and off the plateau, there were trees and flowers. There are few trees on the plateau itself. In the middle of our trip, we went through what can only be described as a desert, with nothing but flat expanses of sand to the horizon, and the lorries whipping it up into dust clouds. (This is apparently what Northern China is like, and the desert is encroaching onto farmland by many tens of miles every year. Water is beginning to be a big problem in China.)

One might expect that no-one lives on the Tibetan plateau except nomads, but there are plenty of people living there in permanent towns. There are settlements in the most unlikely places, some of them containing thousands of people with large blocks of flats. Indeed even the small settlements had new buildings but these were all one storey (and possibly only one or two rooms) with a flat roof. All the new buildings in each settlement was identical. In the towns (save the really big towns) there were only small shops and they often seemed to be selling similar items. We wondered what those people do, because in most areas we were travelling too high for arable farming (there is animal farming: we saw a lot of domesticated yaks and sheep). One of the towns, Golmud, is in the centre of a mineral and oil prospecting area, although only a few years ago it was just a village inhabited by shepherds.

We have four specific memories of China as an industrialising nation. First, there is litter everywhere (far worse than in the UK). The Chinese (at least where we were) do not seem to take care of their environment. Secondly, all the roads are being upgraded. For virtually the whole route of our trip, narrow single carriageways are being converted into wider dual carriageways, mainly by building complete new roads that follow more or less the same routes, but bridging valleys and tunnelling beneath high mountains. The old roads seem to be being abandoned. With so much space, there is no need to re-use the old road as one-half of the new dual carriageway, as we do in the UK. Within the road works, there is no guidance for drivers as to where to drive and often we had to bounce over half-made road foundations. In the whole of our holiday, we saw just one road cone. The amount of money being spent on such construction must be immense.

Thirdly – the reason for so much construction work – the roads are full of enormous lorries, most of them flat-bed lorries with heavy loads secured by tarpaulins and yards and yards of rope. Some had cars perched on top of their loads. The lorries are heavier and longer than anything permitted in the UK. One car transporter contained at least 20 cars. Fortunately trailers do not seem to be permitted. Private cars are rare outside the cities, so nearly all of the traffic that we encountered was lorries. But as China becomes wealthier, the roads are going to get busier and allowing faster cars to overtake the slow-moving lorries (and empty lorries to overtake full ones) in a safe fashion is going to be vital. Hence the dual carriageways, presumably.

And what are those lorries carrying? It's not possible to tell in most cases because of the tarpaulins, but we saw plenty of steel and I guess there is a great deal of cement. That's because of the third reason – every settlement, of whatever size, is full of building sites. Some are staggeringly large – comprising dozens of blocks of flats, each of 30 or 40 storeys. There are housing estates, offices and industrial properties under construction as well, but they do not stand out in the same way as the tower blocks. Who is going to buy all those flats? No-one could tell us.

The final thought about China is about its language, which is pictographic. There is no alphabet, as such, so you have to learn the individual characters. Lonely Planet suggests you need to know about 3,000 to be able to read a newspaper. We learned to recognise just two symbols, and then only in context – for ladies and gentlemen in the context of public toilets (which are not recommended, incidentally). This means that we could not read anything in China unless it was also written in English – which occurred only at airports and on motorway signs. It was very disconcerting, coming into a town but not knowing which one. Fortunately the Chinese use Arabic numerals, as we do – so we would know from a signpost that it was 65 km to the next town, but wouldn't know what town it was.

Terracotta warriors

With the length of the holiday, there was time for only one day of sightseeing (Penny had to get back to work). We chose the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an (pronounced She-an, we think), a city between Xining and Beijing. We were amazed to discover that Xi'an has a population greater than London. We left the group a few hours before the holiday ended as we had to catch a plane from Xining to Xi'an six hours before then. In the event, it was delayed by 3½ hours, so they almost caught us up again. It was at that point that we really needed to find someone at the airport who spoke English to explain to us what was happening – and we did, eventually.

The Terracotta warriors (and horses) formed a life-size army that was buried with Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China in about 200 BC. Wikipedia (never wrong) says that its purpose was to protect the emperor in the afterlife. We had time for a quick tour of the various sites (which is, actually, all that is needed). There were originally over 6,000 warriors but – this we did not know – they are having to be pieced together, as the roof that protected them collapsed and the sculptures were smashed. Now it's a huge 2,200 year-old three-dimensional jig-saw puzzle, occupying many archaeologists' working lives.

Most of the sculptures that have been reconstructed so far have been replaced in their original positions, in trenches below ground level, but those that are still being worked on are in lines at ground level. They look like a cross between Airfix figures and scary Dr Who creatures in human form.

Ever resourceful, the Chinese are once again making terracotta warriors, in the same manner as 2,200 years ago, to sell to visitors. You can buy them in full size, three-quarter size, half-size or quarter-size (or very small). Shipping is included in the price as well. Our half-day tour included a visit to the factory where they are being made. There was plenty of lacquered furniture for sale as well as bronze statues. We were very restrained and just bought a fridge magnet for Liz (who was house-sitting for us). We also bought some tea for Peter, who decided he liked some of the tea he had been drinking over the holiday (odd, because he never drinks tea normally).

(end of report)