

Travel diary

Destination:

China

Journeying beyond the touristy trappings of the Far East, **Suzan Crane** treads the maze of China, a kaleidoscope of colours and textures

A spray of garish neon welcomed me to Kunming one cool summer evening, a detonation of frantic colour, flashing lights and pageantry assaulting the senses. The capital city of the Yunnan province resembled every Chinatown in any country in the world, but was no dime store imitation, no emigrant ghetto in San Francisco or Kuala Lumpur. This was the real thing – China in all its vivid, vibrant glory. Not yet a year into my global journey, I was enthralled and a bit intimidated by this Asian behemoth, a less trodden and more challenging destination than my previous Australian and Southeast Asia stomping grounds. Although fascinating, a scenically splendid land steeped in culture, history and heritage, China was, and remains, one of the most exhausting and maddening countries I've ever visited. A mangled web of contradictions – at once rigid and linear, chaotic and frenetic – where queues are nonexistent and humanity melts into a mass of flailing limbs and pulsating bodies, China is a country where personal space is seemingly an alien concept.

Understandable, though, when one considers the rules of the jungle. With more than 1.3 billion people (including 55 recognised ethnic minority groups) it is indeed a matter of 'survival of the fittest'. Initially deeming the Chinese to be surly and inhospitable, as time passed I began to appreciate the historical and sociological circumstances that manifested the collective character of this unique nation. With only about one per cent of the population speaking English, and tourism being a relatively recent development, it stands to reason that the locals, particularly in rural areas, display some wariness towards foreigners. But with Beijing hosting the 2008 Olympics and the MTV generation increasingly embracing all things Western, these statistics and attitudes are quickly changing.

When the going got tough, though, a good soul inevitably came to my rescue with several of these kind folks lingering in my memory: Godspeed Wu, the eccentric bicycle guide from Chengdu with whom I still occasionally correspond, the open and loquacious university student sharing my Beijing dorm room and the young woman who befriended me in a city of nearly 15

million people.

Following are journal excerpts written while traversing the labyrinth that is China, a country that rattled and inspired, challenged and uplifted, educated and enlightened me. The immediacy of the entries, I believe, evokes the truest sense of my experiences and impressions as they occurred. Consider this is a sketch rather than a comprehensive portrait of an intriguing country that would likely take a lifetime to fully explore. As always when travelling, the trials *are* the tribulations and the journey *is* the destination.

September 9, Kunming

China is a fantastically disorienting place, a tangle of anarchic traffic (pedestrians,

bicycles, cars, livestock), incomprehensible language barriers and undecipherable signage all contributing to the confusion. It is as alien to this Westerner as I appear to be to the multitudes who brazenly stare at me as though I were a circus freak. The simplest task can be an exercise in patience, resourcefulness and tenacity. And I am never without my trusty Mandarin-English phrasebook, an essential companion when venturing beyond the guesthouse. Yesterday an attempt to purchase facial cleanser at a large department store was a feat of gargantuan proportions. Try explaining "combination skin" to a clerk who smiles and nods, but clearly doesn't comprehend! Whew...exhausting!

Circumstances change suddenly, though, when travelling. The other day, while attempting to communicate with a salesperson – each of us painstakingly locating one word at a time in the phrasebook to assemble a basic sentence – a voice asked if I needed assistance. It came from a young Chinese man who subsequently helped me locate and fairly negotiate a price for my new digital camera. Later, I joined him and his friends for dinner (which cost me just over US\$1 dollar!) where I was the only Westerner in a group of nine Chinese, three Japanese and one Tibetan. Back at their guesthouse we busted loose, dancing to Chinese rock and American rap music.

September 12, Dali

Dali is a quaint village with aggressive vendors, so today I learned to say "Do not touch me" in Mandarin. Inexplicably eliciting strange reactions, I later discovered that I was bellowing "I want a friend!" to the incredulous locals. Mandarin is a difficult tonal language with many similar words, but this was by far my most amusing faux pas to date!

September 14, Lijiang

My chopsticks slipped and food dropped from my mouth while dining at a family restaurant this evening. Witnessing this minor accident, "Mama" ran to the table and tried to feed me herself, lest I starve to death!

September 17, Lugu Hu

Unfortunately, the tribal people in this picturesque village exist for 'show'. More authenticity is visible around the nearby

Tibetan monastery and hot springs where traditionally-clad ethnic minorities (Yi, Mosu and others) go about their daily lives – shepherding herds of goats, horses, cows, water buffalo, mules; washing clothes and dishes in streams; hauling bushels of hay on their backs, oblivious to the demands of commercial tourism. The intermittent road is a serpentine affair that segues from pavement to a dirt path to a rocky brook.

September 19, Transiting through Yunnan

I don't know where I am and I'm not sure where I'm going. But, as usual, the journey surpasses the destination. Rows of corn and sunflowers reach to a sky that hugs capped mountains. Silver clouds hover over peaks like grey misty bonnets, wildflowers blooming amidst fields of iridescent green lakes. This is God's handiwork, a sharp contrast to man's handiwork evident in war-ravaged Cambodia and Laos. In the distance, a golden ray of sunshine infiltrates the cloudy veil while below a verdant valley boasts tiered plots of farmland intersected by a lone winding mountain road. I am, once again, the OFP (only foreign person) and alone seem to notice the pervasive lush beauty. The sun has completely abandoned us now and chill air caresses my face through the open window. I don't want to doze as I normally do on long bus journeys, not wanting to miss one single moment of this experience.

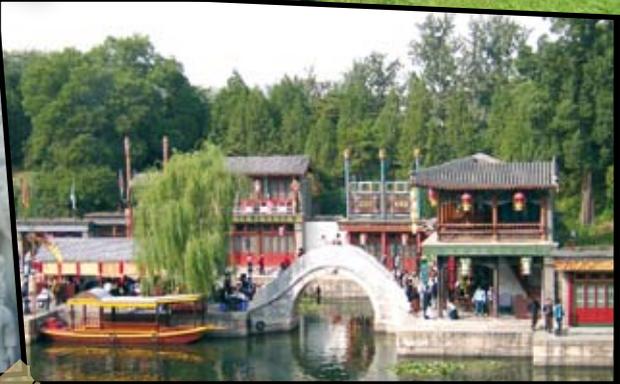
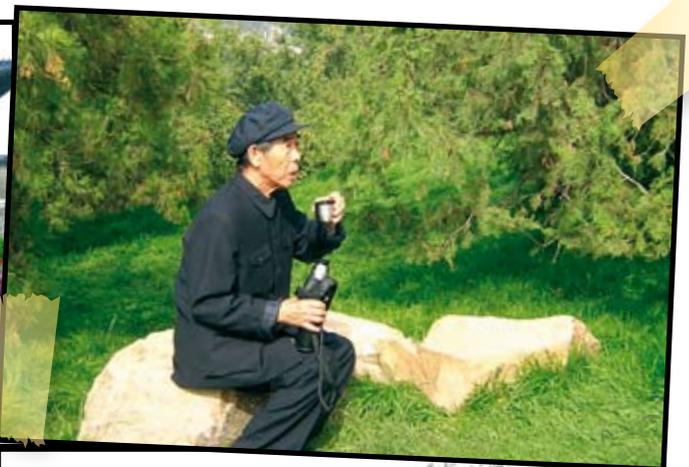
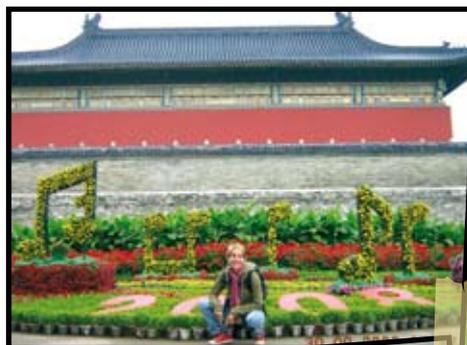
September 23, Somewhere in Yunnan
A thousand rolls of film couldn't definitively capture the character-etched faces of the rural inhabitants. Nor could a snapshot paint an accurate picture of the colourful costumes donned by the region's ethnic minorities. And even if a photo could do justice to such folkloric charm, the privilege of owning that image is generally denied. The occasional tribal woman will acquiesce – but only for a price. Most Chinese appear old, and one wonders if it's premature ageing due to the physicality of their lives or if they just live long enough to showcase their distinctive visages.

September 25, Still somewhere in Yunnan

Since arriving, I have suffered conditions previously unimaginable. Travelling is tough, and embracing cultures requires serious compromise, but sanitary conditions here are diminishing to a point where I fear permanent constipation. Facilities range from squat toilets to a literal hole in the ground, with no privacy and stench only a sewer could love. Factor in the lack of decent coffee and the vile cigarettes I'm smoking (I know – good opportunity to quit!), my system has gone into shock.

September 27, Somewhere in Sichuan

Contemplation of China's allure is persistently interrupted by the revolting sound of phlegm emission. A saying that roughly translated means "It's better out than in" is a philosophy to

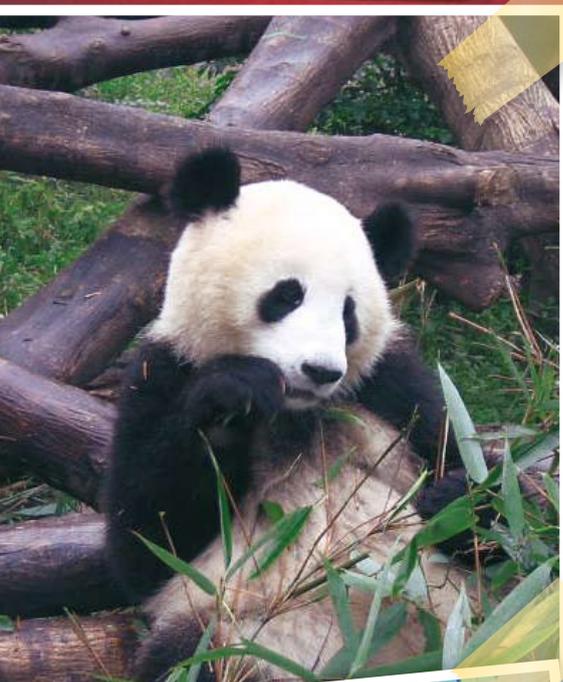
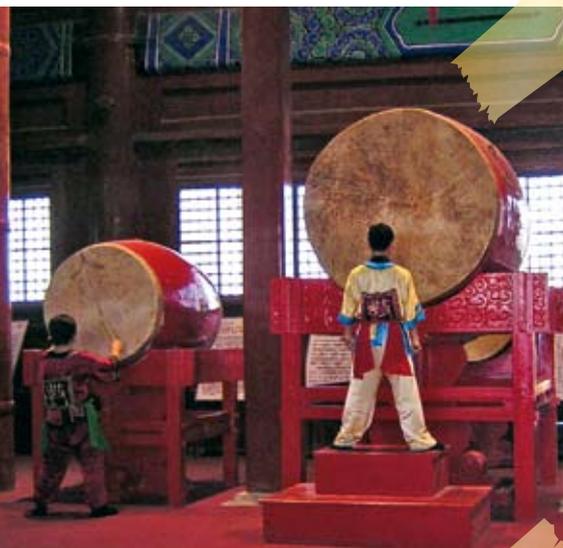


Access all Areas...

which the Chinese stringently adhere. Spitting has reportedly been outlawed in some cities, but word has clearly not yet spread to the areas I've visited.

September 28, Songpan

I have found faith, although there are no churches, mosques or temples around. It is in the stillness of my mind and in trusting that my horse will not eject me into the death-defying valley below. It's in the certainty that the path I



am taking is the right one and the clarity of the sky above me. It is in the folk hymns our guide is humming. It is in the easy flight of the bird that soars before me, in the multihued flowers that grow with abandon amidst the pine trees and dirt. It is in the music of the babbling creek beside us, the scent of the pine needles commingling with horse manure; it is in the joy of emptying my mind of fear, anticipation and apathy. It is in the simple pleasure of sitting around a fire engulfed by clean air and clear sight. It is the opening of my eyes, my ears and my heart.

October 1, Beijing

They were everywhere. As far as the eye could see, in every direction – people and then more people. It seemed like the entire population had descended upon China's capital. This is the day before National Day, the country's most important patriotic holiday and an excuse to take a week off work. But for this foreigner who suffers from a moderate bout of claustrophobia, Beijing's party was my living nightmare. People pushing, shoving, moving in thick groups – a living, breathing conveyor belt. Everywhere, I was confronted with thousands more Chinese revellers, being carried along in a frenzy of feverish flesh, unable to extricate myself from the human mass. Meltdown-provoking ingredients, to be sure. I needed to escape the throngs. Finally I found a Starbucks and here I sit sipping a mochachino. A much-needed respite and source of familiarity as I prepare again to access my intended destination.

Try as I did, I never reached the Forbidden City today. I got close – bought a ticket, reached the ticket-taker, and found I was holding admission to Tiananmen Gate rather than Forbidden City. Figured I'd go anyway since I spent 15 yuan, but again found my efforts thwarted by an impenetrable sea of people.

October 3, Beijing

Today we trekked part of the Great Wall of

China. In truth, I spent much of the 10-kilometre journey crawling on all fours, perilous steps and my fear of heights necessitating the position. Although I was awed to be there – after all, it is the Great Wall of China – the experience was marred somewhat by hordes of postcard-selling touts. Unfortunately, every important world site I've beheld is plagued by commercial ventures. But still... *I trekked the Great Wall of China!*

October 6, Beijing

Finally made it to the Forbidden City. Fabulous, except for the incongruity of a fast food joint in the middle of the ancient compound. Also visited the beautiful, tourist-laden Summer Palace. Tomorrow I will wander the local markets, a favourite activity and edifying cultural experience.

October 10, Inner Mongolia

A 24-hour train journey deposited us in Inner Mongolia (not to be mistaken with Outer Mongolia, an independent country). Hoping for a traditional experience – camping in a yurt, riding horseback across the sprawling grasslands – what we encountered was a *tourist* yurt, hassling guides and freezing climate. We promptly fled to Xian, another 24-hour train excursion away.

October 12, Xian

The highlight of this lovely metropolis is the 'underground city' of terracotta soldiers built by some emperor to protect him in death. An amazing exhibition, but more beguiling was considering the ego of the man who commissioned its construction.

October 16

Back to Chengdu for a flight to Tibet, an entirely different and equally remarkable expedition, fodder for another column. A myriad of impressions continue to colour my reflections of China – a dizzying and profound experience which will remain indelibly engraved in my memory.