

Travel Tips

Thomas Kreif, WEAC-Fox Valley Retired Member and Traveler

<https://www.bearpawoutdoors.com/>

mesh@athenet.net

Why China in January – are you nuts! It's winter?

First, the temperature range was 32 to 50 where we visited. Even if it snows – disappears the next day. No tourists, except for us and, of course, the cost is less this time of year.

What is the nickname the Chinese have for Westerners?

It is “big nose”. Westerners are taller and have bigger noses than the Chinese.

What was the most humorous event I experienced?

In Beijing, we came upon a man who was dressed in traditional ancient Chinese garb holding a birdcage. Obviously, he was trying to get the Chinese people to pay for having a picture taken with him. When he saw us, he asked whether we would mind posing with him. Immediately, dozens of Chinese individuals got out their apple smart phone. We were instant celebrities. Maybe we should have asked for donations.

What about crime in the cities of Beijing and Shanghai?

We always felt safe. The police, unarmed, were like the U.S. walking patrol police in the 1950s. We felt safer there than in big U.S. cities such as Chicago and New York.

What about traffic?

There is a lot, but their public transportation is superb. To reduce the number of cars on the streets, Beijing adopted every other day you can use the car system. The last number of the license plate is either a one or a two for this purpose. The solution for many Chinese is to own two cars to supposedly beat the system.

What about political propaganda in a Communistic nation?

We saw none on the streets where we toured, and we did quite a bit of walking the streets with our guide.

What is the retirement age for women in China?

Women can retire at age 50 and for men it is 60. There is a movement by the government to possibly raise the retirement age for both by five years.

What about the language barrier?

We used a Chinese dictionary on our smart phones and relied on help from our guide when there was an issue. Very few Chinese speak English even though it is mandatory in their schools. They take the course, and then lose the ability after they graduate, as they have no real use for English.

What about unclean and dirty water – weren't you afraid?

Even the Chinese either drink bottled water or boil first. Hot water and tea are very popular. We had fruit, vegetables, etc. but not from street vendors. When we toured and ate at local establishments, we were careful.

Cost of food, etc. in China?

Going out to eat was a treat and averaged half the price of a U.S. meal. In addition, Chinese do not expect tips. Drinks on the other hand were comparable to what we pay in the U.S. I would say hotel accommodations were half what we pay in the U.S.

What do the Chinese view as their life under the Communist Party?

We saw extremely happy and vibrant people. There is upward economic mobility for individuals. The life of the Chinese is better than what their parents had. There is plenty of food and beautiful public parks. The cities look like the cities we presently live in except for the traffic. Everyone knows that Chinese justice is “swift and fair” – don't break the laws. The people themselves do not believe in rehabilitation of those who break the laws. One of our guides mentioned that in China with 23 nationalities, to have a democracy like in the U.S., would cause chaos, as nothing would get done. The one-party system with a strong President allows the country to be more focused.

Besides the historical sites such as the Great Wall and the Xian terracotta warriors, what other nugget of historical information did you find interesting?

To begin with, all signs etc. are in both Chinese and English. During the times of the emperors, look at the chairs. The higher the status of the official, the more uncomfortable the chair would be. The emperor had the largest and most uncomfortable throne to make sure he was paying attention. On the other hand, the emperor wanted to make sure his officials were paying attention, which is why they were required to stand.

Why all these questions and answers?

I am trying to get you to visit China in the Winter, and to enjoy their culture.

Practical Matters

When to go?

Winter!

How should I arrange for such a trip?

I would suggest going with a travel agent to navigate the waters and a reputable travel company. My travel agent is Creative Group out of Appleton and the tour company was SITA.

Reading the fine print?

Make sure that when the tour company announces their tour dates (in this case, SITA), they will have the tour even for one person. There were two of us. So, our tour really became a private tour. Might be a great idea as to why you should do this in Winter. Also, make sure you look over the travel information costs and what you are going to see.

Are there weight limits on luggage?

For international flights the weight limit is 50 pounds. The key to remember is that you will be taking domestic flights in China; thus, the weight limit is 44 pounds on domestic Chinese flights. If your bags are overweight, you will be assessed a fee,

Do I need a visa?

Yes, you do need a visa, and we worked through the travel agent and tour company. They were extremely helpful, which allowed us to get ten-year visas.

What about the Internet and cell phone usage in China?

We joked about the fact that both the Internet and our cell phones worked better in China than in the U.S.

What about flights?

I would book a direct flight out of and back to O'Hare. We used United Airlines with economy plus for the extra leg room and it was worth the price as a direct flight is nearly 14 hours. We left the car at the Wisconsin Coach Bus station on 13th Street in Milwaukee for no additional charge.

Is such a Chinese trip for 12 days expensive?

Here is the breakdown for the trip, which in my opinion, is extremely reasonable:

1. Airfare was \$1,150 roundtrip. Because we wanted the extra legroom, add an additional \$430 round trip.
2. Wisconsin Coach Lines (Milwaukee to O'Hare) roundtrip was \$60 per person.
3. Cost of SITA World Tours (includes hotel, transportation, trip insurance, tour guides, all tours, all breakfasts, and other meals depending on the tours) was \$2370 per person.
4. Chinese money (purchased through my bank in U.S.) was \$500 per person.
5. Individual Chinese visas including processing—just over \$150 per person.
6. Already had our passports; no cost for me there.

I think this was an outstanding price for all services rendered, and what we got to see and do.

By the way, anyone interested in doing the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Beijing to St. Petersburg in two years?