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*The Beckham family in Tiananmen Square
in front of the Forbidden City entrance (left);
Construction in Beijing (right)
photos by Garry Beckham*

Our Christmas Trip to China

By Garry Beckham

IT WAS SEPTEMBER 2004 and we had just gotten over jetlag from our long trip from Plano to Seoul, South Korea. My wife, Debbie, was teaching mathematics at Seoul American High School, part of the Department of Defense Dependent School system for military children. It was her second time to be stationed in Seoul and we had made the transpacific flights many times. I was the computer system's administrator at the school.

When your family is spread all over the world, daughters Jill in Germany and Leah in Texas, planning family events well in the future is necessary. We had just learned that Jill was going to have our first grandson and Leah had just become engaged. The two girls had lived in the Philippines when I was stationed there with the Air Force. While in the Philippines they had traveled to Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea on shopping trips. Since our family was expanding and the new arrivals to the family would complicate scheduling family events, Debbie and I decided we would treat the girls to a China family Christmas trip. One of the reasons we selected mainland

China was due to the rapid economic changes and westernization China was experiencing and, also, the country's preparations for the 2008 Olympics. We wanted our daughters to see parts of China before it became too westernized.

From Seoul we flew only a couple of hours to the Beijing airport, which had made some major modifications since Debbie and I had visited seven years earlier. We had booked a private tour for the family, which was only a few dollars more than a large tour with 30 or more unknown tourists. This way we would not always be waiting on someone at every stop. We found our tour guide, Yang Mei Lin, a lovely young lady who spoke perfect English. Most of the tour guides are Communist party members and I am sure they do some kind of intelligence gathering for the State. After loading the luggage we were on the road to Beijing as the sun slowly slid off the edge of the earth under the gray, gloomy winter sky that covered most of China. We arrived at the Jinglun Hotel in Beijing, checked in and freshened up a bit.

I asked Yang Mei Lin if she could

arrange for us to go to the Chaoyang Theatre to see the Acrobatic show that evening. While we could have taken local transportation, bought the show tickets at the gate and saved a little money, having Yang Mei Lin make the arrangements only cost a little more and we were sure not to get over-charged for a taxi ride, get lost due to translation errors since none of us spoke Chinese and also provided a way to get back to the hotel safely after the show. Once the Acrobatic show was arranged we had a very delicious Chinese meal in the hotel dining room. I invited Yang Mei Lin to eat with us and she accepted. Inviting your guide and driver to dine with you is a very inexpensive way of showing your appreciation. This gesture of kindness always seems to pay off in the long run. Also, it affords you the time to get to know your guide and ask lots of questions.

After dinner, the traffic was heavy so the driver opted for a twisting and turning route through narrow streets and alleys to avoid the jams on the main roads. We were at the Chaoyang Theatre in about 20 minutes.



Chinese acrobats
photos by Garry Beckham



One of many thrones within the Forbidden City



Interior building of the Forbidden City

We had arrived 30 minutes before the show started so we were able to select good seats. Once the show began it was action packed for the next two hours. Acrobats from all over China performed magnificent and dazzling tricks that kept the audience tuned in for the entire show. We saw trick cycling, incredible juggling and balancing acts, amazing unicycle tricks and contortionist bending into positions that were unimaginable. At the end of the performance we went to the front of the theater where we took pictures with the performers. If you are ever in Beijing, this is a must-see show.

Our tour package included an American breakfast and a Chinese lunch each day. The dinner costs were left to us to pay. The breakfast buffet at the hotel was filled with American treats and after stuffing ourselves we were off to see the Imperial Palace ("Forbidden City" as it is also known). The driver dropped us off at the south end of Tiananmen Square, which was covered with snow and ice. It was really cold but luckily we had dressed for the weather. Tiananmen Square is huge and as we walked by the west side of the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall, we could see the Monument to the People's Heroes. At a distance we could see a small picture of Mao Zedong and a row of small red flags. As we neared the Tiananmen Gate (Gate of Heavenly

Peace) of the Imperial Palace we could see the picture of Mao was not small but enormous. The huge red flags in contrast to the snow covered walls and grounds gave a truly snowy white Christmas aura. The two miles of red painted walls that surround the palace are 33 feet tall. A huge moat also encircles the palace. We spent about three hours in the Imperial Palace. As we walked and slipped on the ice covered marble walkways between the huge gates, courtyards, halls and palaces, Yang Mei Lin gave us all the historical details of the purpose of each. When Pu Yi, the last Emperor of China, lived in the Imperial Palace, it must have been filled with lavish furnishings, government officials and servants. Now it was quite barren, but the marble works and the huge red walls topped with golden tiles laid on the pagoda styled architecture makes it still a beautiful winter scene. The gray overcast sky and white covered grounds and buildings made photography a little difficult. Each area of the Imperial Palace would take pages to describe adequately, so hopefully our photos will help you realize the enormous size and beauty. The Forbidden City is also a must-see while in Beijing.

After leaving the Forbidden City, we were chauffeured to a traditional Chinese restaurant. We didn't know what all of the dishes were, but it was very good and

both the guide and driver ate with us. While waiting for the driver to fetch the van, we sipped on some warm Jasmine tea that would not only warm us but also help digest the oils in the Chinese food we had just eaten. As with any tour in China, the guides are required to take the tourists to the State stores. Our guide very politely asked if we would mind looking around in a State run pearl craft store. She said with forgiveness, "Please just look and you don't have to buy anything." Since we knew this was her duty we agreed. The pearl craft store was very interesting, but the prices were high in our judgment, since we had shopped for fresh water pearls in several other markets in other countries including the Philippines.

We then headed to the Summer Palace, which is about 10 miles from the center of town. The Summer Palace sits on 700 acres and abuts a manmade lake. The palace has been rebuilt several times since construction first began in the 12th century. Even in the winter, the Summer Palace, made of painted wood, tiled roofs, marble and jade, was still beautiful and magnificent. We spent about two hours gazing at the architecture, art and strolling along the lake coast under the painted, wooden walkway.

The Temple of Heaven, built between 1408 and 1420, was our next stop. It is a huge garden filled with several altars and



Tower at the Summer Palace



The Temple of Heaven

halls. This 700-acre park is where the Ming and Qing emperors came to pray for a good harvest and offer sacrifices. Two other very unique structures are the Altar of Heaven and the Echo Wall that surrounds the Imperial Vault. By the time we finished the Temple of Heaven, the girls were ready to stop doing cultural tours and do some shopping.

Our tour guide took us to a local shopping area that was very close to the Temple of Heaven and left us there to fend for ourselves. She gave us a card with our hotel name and instructions in Chinese that said, "Take these people to the Jinglun Hotel!" The girls went crazy for the fresh water pearl necklaces and bracelets that were about a third of the price at the State store. They were of good quality and not too expensive. Shopping completed, we flagged a taxi, showed him the card that Yang Mei Lin had prepared and we were on our way. The streets were crowded with cars, motorcycles and people. However, the millions of bicycles that we had seen on a previous trip had disappeared... a sign of the change that was occurring.

The next day we were picked up and were on our way to the Great Wall of China. It was another very cold day. As we drove through heavy traffic in the city, we saw the masses going to work, women doing morning chores and children on

their way to school. After reaching the outskirts of the city, the traffic cleared and we sped along the highway without hindrance. Most of the sections of The Great Wall are more than 2,000 years old. As our van curved around the winding road, we could see the Great Wall snake along the ridges of the mountains and across the valleys. There are several different areas that tourists are taken to struggle with the uneven and very steep steps as they attempt to climb the Great Wall. Our tour took us to the North Pass of Juyonguan, called Badaling, which was built during the Ming Dynasty. Even though it was a cold, overcast, hazy (dust from the Gobi) day, there were lots of tourist and vendors at the wall. We took family pictures at the base of the steps and began our climb. After climbing the uneven steps for about 15 minutes, we all knew this was going to be a physically challenging event. The wall averages 25 feet high and is 16 feet wide at the top. As we ascended the torturous steps we entered watchtowers and armament positions and took pictures of it all. About half way to the top, Debbie had enough. Another 15 minutes and Leah decided to give it up also. Jill and I continued to climb and even though the temperature was below freezing, I had my jacket off and my shirt dripped with sweat. Jill and I made it to the top and reached the point

where the wall was no longer restored. However, there were hundreds of miles yet to be seen another day. From the top, the people at the bottom looked like miniatures in a store window. The lightly dusted snowy mountains were beautiful with the Great Wall zigzagging across the rough ridges. We spent about three hours at the Great Wall of China and were glad to be back in the van.

On the way back from the Great Wall to Beijing, Yang Mei Lin asked if she could take us to another State store that sold cloisonné. Of course we agreed. Actually this turned out to be a great stop, because it was also a factory that made cloisonné. As we lumbered through the factory we saw every step required to make the beautiful cloisonné wares. Some of the works were almost like hand-painted oils. Again, this State shop was a bit pricey so we only bought a couple of small items for gifts.

The next day's pickup time was set with the tour guide as we continued our way into Beijing. The driver would pick us up at 6:30 a.m. and deliver us to the airport. However, we wouldn't see Yang Mei Lin again because her duty was completed and she had another group of tourists the next day.

Peking (Beijing) is the home of the ancient Peking Man that dates back thousands of years. Since 723 B.C.



several different cities occupied the land that is now Beijing. The city is quite modern with tall buildings and great public transportation. There are plenty of things to do both during the day and night. All the western fast foods restaurants and ethnic foods (German, Italian, French, etc.) are available. The Chinese have completed many construction projects and clean up projects for the upcoming 2008 Summer Olympics. It should be quite nice!

On December 24th we flew to Xian, formerly Chang'an, the capital city of twelve dynasties that date back to the 11th century B.C. Chang'an was also the eastern terminus of the famous Silk and Fur roads. Our flight was on time and comfortable with the flight attendants giving us chocolate Santa Clauses. As we approached the Xian airport, to the north and west we could see huge snow covered mountains. To the east were rolling hills and farmlands. The small regional airport in Xian yang (Northwest of Xian) was very simple and easy to navigate. Once we cleared customs we met our tour guide, Jiao Yi and Mr. Lee.

Jiao Yi gave us a quick update about our tour. Excitement filled the bus as we chatted and read our tour books about the Terracotta Warriors. As we left the airport we entered a very nice four-lane toll road that took us through mainly farmland and some small valleys. It took a little less than an hour to get to Xian where the guide had arranged for us to have a delicious Chinese "hot pot" dinner. After Jiao Yi gave us directions as to

how to make the stews, she joined Mr. Lee in another part of the dining room. Each of us made our own hot pot and the boiling broth, vegetables and meat were the perfect meal for a cold Xian day.

The meal ended with some Oolong tea. Mr. Lee had brought the bus to the front door and we were headed to see one of the most amazing sites in the world. After meandering through the streets of Xian, we finally made it through one of the giant gates and headed to Lintong. It took about an hour, but finally we arrived at the Lintong limits. The driver wiggled his way through the heavy traffic and finally got to the eastern outskirts of Lintong. Of course, Jiao Yi had arranged for us to visit a State store that made and sold replicas of the terracotta warriors. It took about 45 minutes to see all the clay wares and then we were on the road again. In about 30 minutes we started passing some archaeological sites and shortly thereafter we finally arrived in the farmer's field where the remains of the first emperor of unified China, Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di, and his terracotta army were discovered in 1974. The emperor was buried with the terracotta army in 209 B.C. and had slept for more than 2000 years. Qin Shi Huang Di had built this army so he could conquer the world during his after life.

We entered the museum and watched a very informative 30-minute movie, in English, about the history of the Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di's Terracotta Army and how it was discovered. As we walked in the first of three pits, we saw the masses of clay formed into thousands of soldiers and horses. Rows and rows of molded clay figures had been unearthed since 1974 with more than 8,000 currently on display. It took more than 40 years for the 700,000 artisans and workers to make the life-like terracotta figures. Many of the workers were buried in the mausoleum to keep the secret of the treasures that were buried with the emperor.

Outside the museum, there were vendors selling many of the products that we saw in the State store for bargain prices. We bought several sets of the small clay warriors that would always remind us of our visit to Lintong.

The drive back to Xian, where we had reservations at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, took about two hours. Xian is a huge



The Great Wall of China (top); Cloisonné factory (middle); Outer city of Xian from the old city wall (bottom); Hot pot lunch (top left)
photos by Garry Beckham



Terracotta Warriors (left & center); The Wild Goose Pagoda (right)

photos by Garry Beckham

walled city that dates back more than 3,100 years. As we neared the city from the rural highway there were people everywhere. While driving through one of the four large gates of the walled city, I asked Jiao Yi why so many people were out and about. She said, "It's Christmas!" This seemed odd to me because the majority of the Chinese had been Buddhist before Mao's time. As we inched through the streets of Xian it became obvious this was a really big event in Xian. There were lots of Christmas lights and stars on the stores and buildings. There were lines of people waiting to get on buses, and into restaurants. Debbie asked Jiao if she thought we would be able to find a place to eat and she replied yes, if we didn't mind waiting for a few hours. The Hyatt was completely packed. On our way to our rooms, which were 12-24 and 12-25, we noticed that the dining room and ballroom were being setup for a party. Later that evening we listened to the English Christmas carols and cheers of the partygoers. What we learned is the Chinese celebration of Christmas is much like our New Year's Eve.

Of course everyone was hungry after a long day of flying and viewing one of

the world's great wonders. A call to the maître'd was answered very politely, "Very sorry sir. All tables are taken for the whole night." Room service it was.

Mr. Lee and Jiao Yi picked us up early on Christmas morning. It was very cold and Xian was quiet. It must have been a great party for all. Since our flight didn't depart until early afternoon, Jiao Yi took us to the Big Wild Goose Pagoda that was originally built in 652 A.D. during the Tang Dynasty.

The Wild Goose Pagoda has served as an archive for Buddhist materials that were taken from India. The name Big Wild Goose comes from the ancient legend that reads, "There were two arms of Buddhism, one could eat meat and one where eating meat was taboo. One day those that could eat meat couldn't find any to buy. When seeing a group of big wild geese flying by, a monk said to himself, "Today we have no meat. I hope the merciful Bodhisattva will give us some." At that very moment the leading wild goose broke its wings and fell to the ground. All the monks were startled and believed that Bodhisattva showed his spirit to order them to be more pious. They established a pagoda

where the wild goose fell and stopped eating meat. Hence, the name, Big Wild Goose Pagoda.

We meandered through the park and due to the cold temperatures were glad to get back on the bus where Jiao Yi had some hot Jasmine tea waiting for us. We then flew from Xian to Seoul.

We arrived at our Seoul apartment late on the 25th. The smell of pine resonated through the rooms, and by surprise, Santa Claus must have visited while we were gone. We all opened a few modest presents and sipped some red wine or eggnog. Everyone was cheerful and in very good humor.

The next day Debbie and the girls cooked a wonderful Christmas meal. We were all thankful to have had a great Family China Christmas Trip, but mostly thankful that we could all be together on Christmas.

Garry Beckham is a Plano resident and special contributor. Mr. Beckham has shared two of his vacations with Frisco STYLE Magazine readers. Submit your most interesting vacation to editor@stylepublishing.com in a 150-word synopsis and if selected we will publish it in a future issue.