

1/23/24

Chico, California
Chamber of Commerce Mission to China
November 25 – December 3, 2007

Background

This blog is created from memory, the trip itinerary, and video, as I was not writing blogs until 2010.

We got back from a cruise in San Diego in early 2007 and drove to Chico to see LaRue's sister, Loa. LaRue's niece, Maxine, and husband Dick, also live in Chico. They own and operate two Jiffy Lubes. They came to dinner and told us about their recent trip to China. They went with the Chico Chamber of Commerce on a trade mission sponsored by the Chinese Government. The trip was fantastic, and cost them about a third of the cost of a normal tourist trip. They received preferential treatment since they were sponsored by the Chinese Government. We were in awe and asked many questions.

In the course of the evening they told us the Chamber may offer another trade mission trip in the fall. If we were interested, we could probably go using their business as a qualifier. We should check it out with the Chico Chamber of Commerce.

We went to the Chamber of Commerce the next day. We could go if they could get the trip together with approximately 150 people. We got our name on the list to be notified. Angie would be the organizer.

We were home a short while and got an email from Angie. The trip was scheduled for November 25-December 3, 2007, for a limited number. We wasted no time in sending an affirmative reply. We hoped we were high on the list. Angie replied a few days later that we were accepted. She would make all the arrangements from Chico to China and back. All we had to do is send our passports to her, so she could get our visas for China.

We opted for the extra cost side trip to Xi'an to see the Terracotta Warriors. The total cost to us would be \$1,599 each. It included airfare, transfers, 5 star hotels, meals, and venue entry fees.

The itinerary she sent follows:

Day 1 11/25 San Francisco to Beijing. China Air 986. Depart 1:56pm
Day 2 11/26 Arrive Beijing airport 6:15pm
Day 3 11/27 Beijing
Day 4 11/28 Beijing
Day 5 11/29 Beijing/Shanghai (for those not going to Xi'an)
Beijing/Xi'an (for those going to see the Terracotta Warriors)
Day 6 11/30 Xi'an or Shanghai
Day 7 12/01 Xi'an /Shanghai
Day 8 12/02 Shanghai
Day 9 12/03 Shanghai to Beijing to San Francisco

We decided to drive to Chico, as we could leave our car there. Then join the group for the charter bus ride to the airport in San Francisco on the 25th. Thanksgiving is on the 22nd. Our family was going to the beach in southern California for the Thanksgiving holiday, and we couldn't work it in our schedule. We didn't want to burden Loa for Thanksgiving, so we decided to be on the road and arrive in Chico the day after Thanksgiving.

November 21. Wednesday

Left home and drove to Winnemucca, Nevada to spend the night. Had a nice dinner in a Basque restaurant.

November 22. Thursday (Thanksgiving)

Continued east on I80 to the Sparks/Reno area. Turned north on US395 and overnighted in Susanville, California. Had dinner in the Black Bear Diner and got the last two Thanksgiving Day turkey dinners.

November 23. Friday

Continued on highway 36 to Chester and highway 32 over the hill to Chico. Loa's place was just a few blocks from highway 32 as you enter Chico.

November 24. Saturday

Repacked our stuff for the China trip. We were advised to pack lightly, and leave room for things you buy in China. We packed a light-weight fold up duffel bag for the return trip, and we used it.

Did a dry run to the tour meeting place. We wanted to make sure we could find it and not be late. Dick and Maxine came by for dinner and passed on helpful information on China. We are ready to go.

Day 1 November 25. Sunday departure

Made it to our meeting place at 5am with no difficulty. Two large buses arrived, and we loaded up. We were leaving early in the morning since we would be traveling in the commuter traffic into the bay area. It is a 3 hour drive without heavy traffic.

The buses were operated by Asian Tours and driven by Asians. Our driver really scared us. The first 30 miles were on a two-lane highway. Our driver drove in the middle. Even when we got to Interstate 5 and 80 he straddled two lanes. I was a nervous wreck by the time we got to San Francisco International (SFO).

We arrived about 9am even with the heavy commuter traffic. Our flight departure was not until 1:56pm. It was too early to check in. We lined up in a long line and waited. The downside of flying with a group is there is no advance seat selection. The flight was 14 hours, and I wanted an aisle seat. The plane was a 747 usually configured with 8 seats across in the middle row. I would go crazy sitting in a middle seat unable to get out. The long wait in line paid off as I got an aisle seat in the center section, and LaRue was next to me. I might survive 14 hours.

We had time to kill before departure, so looked for a decent place to eat. Passed on the excellent Chinese places and chose southwestern food (Dick and Maxine had told us we would get tired of 8 days of Chinese food in China).

We found our gate and sat down to wait. We could see our plane being loaded for the flight. It was a tired looking old China Air Boeing-747. The paint and markings were faded and streaked with black from flying through smog laden skies. It was not an encouraging sight.

We departed on time at 1:56pm. The cabin crew promptly began serving refreshments followed by dinner. There were two choices for dinner, which

were American or Chinese. By the time they got to us there was only Chinese available. It was not too bad. We also got complimentary wine that helped somewhat.

Sitting in an airplane seat for 14 hours is not something I like to do. I *would read a while, then get up and walk. This was for the exercise to the front, and back to my seat.* I soon discovered self-serve soda and water in the galley/restroom area about 10 rows behind us. A bulkhead had been placed there to block off the tail section *of the aircraft, since it was not utilized for passengers.* It created a large area where you could stand and even look out the window in the door. I spent a lot of time there. As we got close to Beijing it was interesting to view the barren snow-covered landscape. There were no lights or cities. I decided it must be Mongolia.

We landed at 6:15pm Beijing time. We had crossed the International Dateline. Beijing is also about 16 hours ahead of us. Now what is the date? Nobody knew. However, it was still day 1 of our tour.

Our tour guide met us at baggage claim. He goes by the English name, Richard. He advised us to not talk politics or talk bad about the Chinese Government. Agents are always watching and listening. He would lose his job and disappear if we were observed doing so. That was a sobering piece of advice.

We would use two tour buses. A large one for the group that would go from Beijing to Shanghai. A smaller one for about 35 of us that would go from Beijing to Xi'an, and then rejoin the group in Shanghai.

It was a long drive from the new airport to the city in heavy bumper to bumper traffic. We were all looking forward to the hotel and getting to bed. However, Richard said there was a change. We would go to a famous restaurant for a Peking duck dinner before we go to the hotel. I think we all groaned.

The restaurant was multi-story and outlined with neon lights. The Chinese like lights and anything of importance was outlined in neon.

We walked up to the 3rd floor and were seated at huge round tables for about 10 people each. A huge lazy-susan was in the center of each table.

Then platters and bowls of food arrived and were placed on it. Must have been 20 different dishes. Some were recognizable, looked good, and some didn't. We ate what we could. The lazy-suzan spun like crazy. We were given our choice of soda pop, tea, beer, or water. Then carts of roast Peking duck were rolled to each table. A carver brandished a meat cleaver and served duck. I think we all groaned again.

I noticed the guy across from me was not eating or drinking anything. He got an energy bar out of his backpack and ate it. He said he was not taking a chance on getting sick. Fast forward. He got sick the next day, and was the first to do so.

We got to our hotel about 11pm. It had been a long day and we crashed. The hotel was a modern high rise 5 star western style hotel. However, the beds were hard as a rock. They were hard in every hotel we stayed in. We were told that is the way the Chinese prefer them.

Day 2 November 26. Beijing

Breakfast was 6-8am. We had to be on our tour bus for departure at 8am. We barely had time to eat and exchange dollars for Chinese yuan. The rate was around 1,000 yuan per dollar. It was a lot of paper to stuff into a wallet. Breakfast was a buffet with Chinese and American food. I couldn't resist having noodles with my American breakfast. I only did it the first morning.

Before we departed that morning Richard reminded us again to watch what we say. He also gave us a lesson on the Chinese language. The most useful word that I remember is "knee how" for hello.

We drove through heavy traffic that morning. Bicycles were everywhere. They reminded me of swarms of birds swooping along in formation when the traffic light turned green. People of all ages on bicycles, and even cargo hauling bikes. I saw one with about 30 new tv's stacked high, and tied onto a flatbed. Scooters and taxis were zipping everywhere.

I thought it strange the taxis were new Volkswagon's (made in China). All were painted green and bronze. I also noticed the luxury cars and limo's were black Buicks (made in China).

Our first stop was at a park for us to walk through to an ancient temple and museum. We saw huge groups of elderly people doing group exercise. We stared at them, and they stared at us. It was a beautiful clear sunny day, which is very rare for the Beijing area.

After touring the temple and museum we boarded the bus and drove around Beijing to see the new venues for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Richard explained the Olympic venues were a huge issue with the working class people. The government had moved thousands of them to new high-rise buildings. Then they demolished whole neighborhoods (walled compounds) to build the venues. These people were the 2nd and 3rd generation to live in the walled compounds. This is all they knew and all they wanted. We then drove by the only remaining compound known as the Hutong Compound. It was to be demolished, but the residents were holding out. Richard told us we could experience life in the Hutong Compound. There was an extra cost tour option which was lunch with a resident family on day 4. We decided to do it.

Our 2nd stop was at a jade factory where they made jewelry, statues, and art objects out of huge chunks of jade. Many items were thousands of dollars. It was interesting, but we didn't buy anything.

In the afternoon we drove out of the city to the Ming Dynasty Temple and Tombs. It was on the way to the Great Wall at Badaling Pass. We could hardly wait to get to the Wall and experience walking on it.

After the Ming dynasty temple we drove out through flat farm land on a narrow road. There was barely room to pass when we met another vehicle, which was not often. We could see we were approaching steep mountains, Badaling pass, and the Great Wall.

At last we got to the well preserved and restored section of the Wall at Badaling Pass. The entire wall is 5,500 miles long and was constructed by the Ming Dynasty in 1368-1604AD.

I thought I would walk up the steps to the top of the pass at the east end. The steps are huge and steep. I gave up after about 100 yards. We spent about 3 hours exploring and visiting the museum. There was a long line of outdoor shops, and I bought a Great Wall hoodie sweatshirt.

Darkness set in and we reboarded the bus. We were headed towards Beijing 43 miles away via a nice freeway. We suddenly pulled over for a sick passenger. It was the guy who didn't eat or drink anything the night before, so he wouldn't get sick. So much for his idea. He got back on the bus, and we resumed our journey. At least for a while until we pulled into a neon lit place for dinner and a show. We all groaned again. The sick guy stayed on the bus in the cold.

We had a huge Chinese buffet followed by a two hour show of acrobats and dancers. I thought it would never end. It was about 11pm before we got back to the hotel.

Day 3, November 27. Beijing

Up early again for a hard day touring. My selection of American food tasted especially good after all the Chinese food yesterday.

Our first stop was Tianamin Square (shown as Tian An Min in our itinerary). It is the largest square in the world. LaRue was not feeling well and decided to stay on the bus.

Richard reminded us again to watch what we say, as agents would be everywhere. He was right. We could spot them as they all looked alike in dark clothing and carried a small device like a cell phone. They would casually stroll by our group listening. It was amusing.

Street vendors surrounded us trying to sell junk. The hot item was fur Chinese Army hats with the red star. Several of us bought one at \$3 to wear around Red Square. The fur was dog fur. We didn't care. The agents did not seem to care for our laughing and carrying on in the hats.

I split off from the group and walked around the square on my own. I came across fresh blood. There must have been an incident earlier. It was unnerving, and reminded me of the seriousness of this place. I got out of there.

LaRue had a difficult time while we were at the square. She was vomiting and had diarrhea. The bus driver drove her to a public toilet where she had

to cross several lanes of traffic. The toilet was crowded, and only had holes in the floor, so it was a miserable experience.

Our next stop was at a pharmacy and medical building. Dick and Maxine told us this was a rip off, so we were on high alert. We were assigned a young female technician/translator, Then given a video presentation on the wonders of Chinese doctors and medicine. We would meet with a doctor later. He would interview us, and prescribe medicines to cure our ailments. I bowed out at this point.

LaRue wanted to go back to the hotel. I got with Richard. He got a taxi, instructed the driver, and I gave her the yuan for the fare Richard negotiated.

Back in the building I was put in a room with my young female technician/translator to wait out the medical interviews. She told me she has a test that evening, which was on ordering dinner from a French menu. Could I help her? Matter of fact I could, and we went over the menu. This makes me wonder just what the Chinese knew about us (we had lived in French speaking Switzerland).

I began to wonder if the Secret Police might confront me about my Air Force activity, which was snooping on Communist countries. The Chinese Government is highly paranoid. My handheld GPS would not display maps in Beijing.

I met up with the group after their medical interviews were over. They were all carrying sacks of prescriptions with long-term renewals arranged. It was 100's of dollars, but they were happy. I am glad we were forewarned.

We had dinner and entertainment at a huge restaurant in downtown Beijing. The restaurant was on multiple floors and packed. They specialized in exotic Chinese dishes, such as male animal parts. I didn't find much that I cared for. We got back to the hotel about 10pm. LaRue had got back in her taxi and was doing ok.

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Day 4, November 28, Beijing.

LaRue decided to stay at the hotel and rest. The first stop was the Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City.

The Forbidden City is where 29 Emperors ruled. It has 9,999 rooms. The tour bus let us off at the entrance and we walked through to the other side, which was about a mile. It took about 3 hours with all the stuff to look at.

We rejoined the tour bus, and it took those of us doing lunch with the Hutong compound family to meet bicycle powered rickshaws for transportation to the compound. I got into a rickshaw with another couple and away we went as fast as the guy could pedal. We got into a race with another rickshaw in a narrow alley and nearly crashed. The narrow alley ended, and we came to a stop, much to our relief. From there it was narrow walkways with several turns to the house where we would have lunch. We had too many people for that little house, so they took six of us to another house.

Our host was a retired elderly gent. The place was passed on to him from his parents and grandparents. His wife was working. He was tending two grandkids as well as being our host. He offered us drinks from 1-liter bottles of soda and beer sitting on the window sill to cool. I had beer and that pleased him. He kept trying to give me refills. He seated us at a table he had set up and said he would go to the communal kitchen and get our food. He was gone a while and came back with bowls of Chinese food that we could help ourselves from. I saw something that looked like chicken chow mein. It was good. I assume it was chicken, but I didn't see any cats around.

He was very proud of the little house. Very proud that he had added a bathroom so they would not have to go to the communal bathroom. He had plans to add a kitchen until the government announced they were being kicked out. We all felt bad for the residents.

It was an enjoyable experience in the Hutong compound. Our hosts guided us back out through the narrow walkways to our rickshaws that would take us back to our bus. It was an enjoyable experience. We learned a lot about the peasant worker family way of life.

We spent the rest of the afternoon touring the Summer Palace, Kunming Lake, Longevity Hill, Seventeen-Arch Bridge, and the Marble Boat.

Dinner was at a very popular and crowded hot pot restaurant in downtown Beijing. It was Richards favorite place and a good change of pace. I didn't care much for the boiling pots of oil in front of us.

Day 5. November 29. Beijing/Xi'an.

Travel day today. The big bus passengers fly to Shanghai. Our bus passengers fly to Xi'an to see the Terracotta Warriors and other things. We will rejoin the group in Shanghai on day 7, December 1. Our flights were on East China Air operating out of the old airport. We would see some different territory. It was still a clear beautiful day that is very rare in Beijing. Richard was staying in Beijing. We would have a new tour guide in Xi'an. An envelope was passed around the bus to collect tip money for Richard and our excellent driver. We liked Richard and hated to leave him behind.

Our two hour flight was not full. LaRue and I had the entire row of seats on the right side of the airplane. We were flying East to West from Beijing. We looked down and we were flying parallel to the Great Wall for over an hour. What a sight that was. It made our day.

Our new tour guide (female) met us at the baggage claim. Her English name was Elizabeth, and she spoke excellent English. We boarded the bus and she announced she was a Communist. You could have heard a pin drop. We were all speechless for a moment. She went on to explain she joined the Communist Party for better housing and better education opportunity, and it worked.

The afternoon was spent visiting the Wild Geese Pagoda. Then it was register at the Sheraton Hotel. Workers were putting up outside Christmas lights and a huge decorated tree. It was a very festive and cheerful sight in a grey smoggy day. The American Embassy was having their Christmas party at the Sheraton that evening.

We went to a very large restaurant that was also a noted noodle factory. We witnessed the art of noodle making and then had a Mongolian Wok meal. We were seated at the standard large round tables and directed to

another area to fill our bowls. We were instructed not to leave any belongings at the table because they could disappear. One lady ignored the message and her bag was not there when she got back. I filled my bowl with what I wanted and presented it to the person running the wok. He redid it a bit. What I got back is not what I expected. The evening entertainment was Tang style dancing.

Day 6. November 30. Xi'an

This was a very full day. It started with a stop at a furniture factory and showroom where you could buy furniture for very few US dollars. They would ship it for free. Then it was to a factory making authentic full size reproductions of the Terracotta Warriors. We bought a miniature set much like the set we bought from a street vendor. We had been warned about those from street vendors. They were made of mud and cow manure that would stink after a short time. Sure enough the set we bought from the street vendor started stinking and we threw it away.

Next it was out into the country to see the Terracotta Warriors. We went to the VIP entrance and the gate was closed and nobody around. Elizabeth made a phone call and we were in.

A farmer digging a well discovered the site in 1974 when he dug up broken remnants. Excavation uncovered an entire army of full size soldiers marching in battle formation. They were supported by horses and carriages. Everything was in pieces and were put back together by an army of technicians. Two pits, each the size of a football field have been restored. Researchers believe this just a part of what is still underground. The facial features of the soldiers are all unique and believed to be the face of a soldier at the time. The Terracotta Warriors were created by Qin, the first Emperor of China, to protect him in the afterlife. It is an incredible display.

Well into the evening we attended a formal Chinese tea service. It was very structured, deliberate, and solemn. We got to drink various teas. Not something I would want to do very often to drink tea.

Day 7. Xi'an/Shanghai.

We had an early two hour East China Air flight to Shanghai. We landed at the new ultra-modern Shanghai international airport about 30 miles from the city. We boarded a shuttle bus from the airplane to the gate, and were talking and laughing. An older Chinese guy in a suit yelled for us to shut up. That got our attention. I guess we were being ugly Americans. At least to him we were.

Our tour guide was at baggage claim to escort us. We boarded the bus, and she handed out KFC sacks with chicken sandwiches, chips, sodas, and a Snicker bar. We cheered, and were very appreciative. KFC and McDonalds are very big in China.

It was a sunny clear day, which is unusual for Shanghai, and I enjoyed the bus ride. Shanghai is the largest city I have seen with 26 million people and growing. It is now very modern with high-rise buildings everywhere, and more going up.

We saw the magnetic levitation train traveling at a very high speed of over 400 kilometers per hour. We would ride the train on our return trip.

My handheld GPS has worked since we left Beijing. I can now see on the maps where we have been, and where we are going.

We checked into the very nice Guangdong 5 star hotel in the northwest section. We were surrounded by tall apartment buildings. Our room was on the 22nd floor and we had a good view. The apartments had outdoor verandas. Most had laundry hanging out to dry. We could also see people exercising on rooftops. We were told that if the building had more than 8 stories they had to have elevators.

We reboarded the tour bus to go to a silk manufacturing facility. We saw the complete process from growing the worms to the processing of the silk into the end products. The end of the tour was the sales room where we could buy the end products. We bought four silk comforters to take home. The sales pitch was that a silk comforter would keep you cool in the summer and warm in the winter. They shrunk down the comforter, put them in nice plastic carrying cases, with our name on them, and put them on our tour bus. It was a nice tour and we got what we came for.

That evening we had another big Chinese dinner and went to a show/acrobat extravaganza in a huge auditorium. It was the opening night with a lot of fanfare. I went to sleep before it ended. It was about midnight before we got back to the hotel, dog tired.

Day 8. Shanghai

We were up early for breakfast and the trip to a rug/tapestry manufacturing facility. It took a while to get to the southwest part of the city through heavy traffic. I think we were lost for a while as my GPS showed us going in a big circle. It was interesting.

Upon arrival we were taken to a building and served an early lunch. Then we went to where they weave rugs and tapestry. It is very labor intensive. A big rug may take a year or two to complete. They cost thousands of dollars. The lady manager told us she was finding it difficult to find workers. The younger generation does not want to work hard at low pay. She didn't know if they could produce this stuff much longer.

After that tour we went downtown to a waterfront park and visitor center on the Yangtze River. Then to the business district to browse and shop. I negotiated hard with a street vendor and bought five different fake Rolex watches for \$10. It attracted a crowd, and they clapped when I *got my watches. Our tour guide said they were probably 3-day watches. I wore one going home and it lasted about 3 days. They were beautiful though.*

LaRue and I walked by 100's of outdoor shops selling everything from A to Z. The sidewalks were so crowded you could hardly walk. We also went through a modern supermarket and a department store. It was all very interesting. The plan was for the group to meet up at a big restaurant in the square. We got there early and had an excellent beer in big bottles. Then food appeared on the table. After that we boarded the bus and went to the Wu Gardens before going back to the hotel.

Dinner was scheduled for later that evening. We decided to bow out along with several others. We needed time to wind down, rest, and repack for travel the next day. We went down to the hotel bar and had an excellent martini and bar snacks to start the unwind process. Some of our people were there also.

Day 9. Shanghai, Beijing, San Francisco.

We traveled through heavy traffic through Shanghai to get on the high speed train to the airport. It was an optional extra cost thing and not all were doing it. We elected to take it and purchased tickets at the station. The train was luxurious with high backed comfortable seats. It eased out of the station and rapidly built up speed. There was a digital speed indicator on the bulkhead, and it soon showed 440 kilometers per hour. The scenery was really zipping by, and we were at the airport in no time. It was the ride of a lifetime.

It was a two hour uneventful flight on East China Air to Beijing. Our flight to San Francisco was not until early evening, so we lounged around. I was walking around and a panhandler hit me up for money. I told him I didn't carry money with me when I am walking. He pointed to my wind breaker and said, "in there". I had a zippered pocket on the inside where I kept my wallet. He was right on. I gave him the loose Chinese coins that I had in my pocket.

We were standing in line to check in. A goon in a dark suit pulled the guy in front of me out of the line and took him away. I wondered if I might be next. We got checked in and had the same seats we had coming over. I had an aisle seat, much to my relief.

We departed at 5:15pm on the same Air China 747 that we came over on. The flight was a little over 11 hours due to a strong tail wind. It went by easily, and we landed at SFO about noon. It took a couple of hours to collect luggage, and our people. I got some take out American food for the 3 hour ride to Chico. As we went by San Francisco I remarked that you could put the city in Shanghai and never see it.

The China trip was a great experience. All but two of us had the gastrointestinal problems, and missed some things. I think the bug was brought with us or gotten on the plane coming over. The guy that didn't eat or drink anything the first night was sick the next day. That was proof enough for me.

The end