

ADVENTURES IN CHINA

The clash of old and new, traditional and outlandish in Beijing and beyond is an endless thrill, as Geordie Greig discovered

CHINA IS HEAVEN FOR TEENAGERS: safe, sensational and seriously good fun; an ancient kingdom, but also a manically developing modern superpower. Jasper, my 15-year-old son, read that a 202-storey building was being erected in four months in Chudong and wondered aloud why we had taken so much longer renovating our house in London. The local names alone – Forbidden City, Dragon Lady, House Where All Dreams Come True – promised adventure and spice.

Nothing on our trip to China was ever quite as expected: the palaces, power-biking in the mountains, bamboo-forest treks, t'ai-chi masterclasses, food beyond our dreams and sometimes our nightmares – live, belching toad was not 13-year-old Monica's first choice – or shopping galore (Octavia, Monica's twin, became spectacularly ruthless at bargaining in the markets). We found a land of Buddhas and Bentleys, paddy fields, and stalls selling wriggling insects; super-Zen skyscrapers and medieval, labyrinthine city alleyways. We saw crickets trained for insane races and fighting, with daily bets across the nation running into the millions.

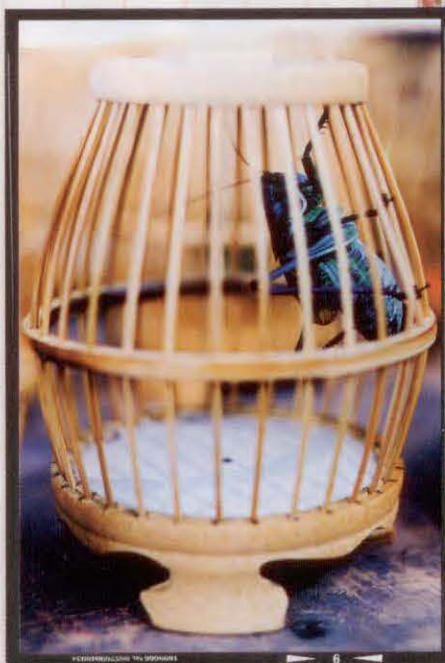
Our holiday was also textured with history, legend and laughter – by us *and* at us. The Chinese are delightfully friendly and, with their one-child policy, a family with three blond-ish teenagers is guaranteed to turn heads. 'Please, you stand while we take picture,' was a repeated request.

OUR TRIP WAS ABOUT four big hits: Beijing, Xi'an (once the most powerful city on earth and now the burial home of the Terracotta Warriors), Shanghai and the bamboo forests in Moganshan. We started in Tiananmen Square, the world's largest and most arid urban space – and, of course, the site of 1989's famous tank stand-off and massacre – awe-inspiring in its scale (41 hectares) and security (it has the highest concentration of surveillance cameras in all of China). Beijing is

imperial and splendid, especially the Forbidden City, the vast residence of the emperors. Why are there steps to every room, asked Jasper? Answer: to keep out the spirits, as Chinese ghosts have no feet. The more steps to your house, the more status you have; fairytale logic like this was never far away.

Our hotel, the supremely comfortable St Regis Beijing, was grand but served up cultural wonders that made my children's eyes pop. Breakfast could be as bizarre as you wished: pork chops with lotus roots, or boiled eggs – fresh or the thousand year-old version. The food in Beijing was always delicious. We ate at street stalls such as Beijing's last state-run café, as well as at the Aman at Summer Palace. Donkey's penis was spotted on one menu, eliciting interminable giggles from the kids, who were cross that I wouldn't fork out £26 for that particular delicacy. The five of us ate like emperors for as little as £20, our chopsticks click-clacking with increasing dexterity each day.

One morning, we signed up for a session with a t'ai-chi tutor in the Temple Of Heaven park. Master Liu casually mentioned he had appeared in the TV





comedy travelogue series *An Idiot Abroad*, which, for Jasper, was almost as cool as when we landed at Heathrow and found the model Cara Delevingne standing next to us at the baggage carousel. We saw red fan-dancers on the grass, synchronised hand-clappers (apparently it's good for your health), an impromptu marriage market on a park bench ('husband must have decent car and be 1.8m tall') and group days out with 70 office staff in matching acid-orange T-shirts. We were fascinated by 798 Art Zone – the artists' quarter – and by markets filled with jade, Mao memorabilia, knock-off CDs and a million trinkets. And that was all before seeing the Great Wall, just one hour's drive from downtown Beijing. The Wall defied disappointment. It looks like a dragon's tail that vanishes into the distant mountains: magical, ➤

Clockwise from opposite: a cricket for sale at market; the Red Capital Residence bar; The St Regis Beijing, the city's business district; Chanel boutique at the Peninsula Shanghai



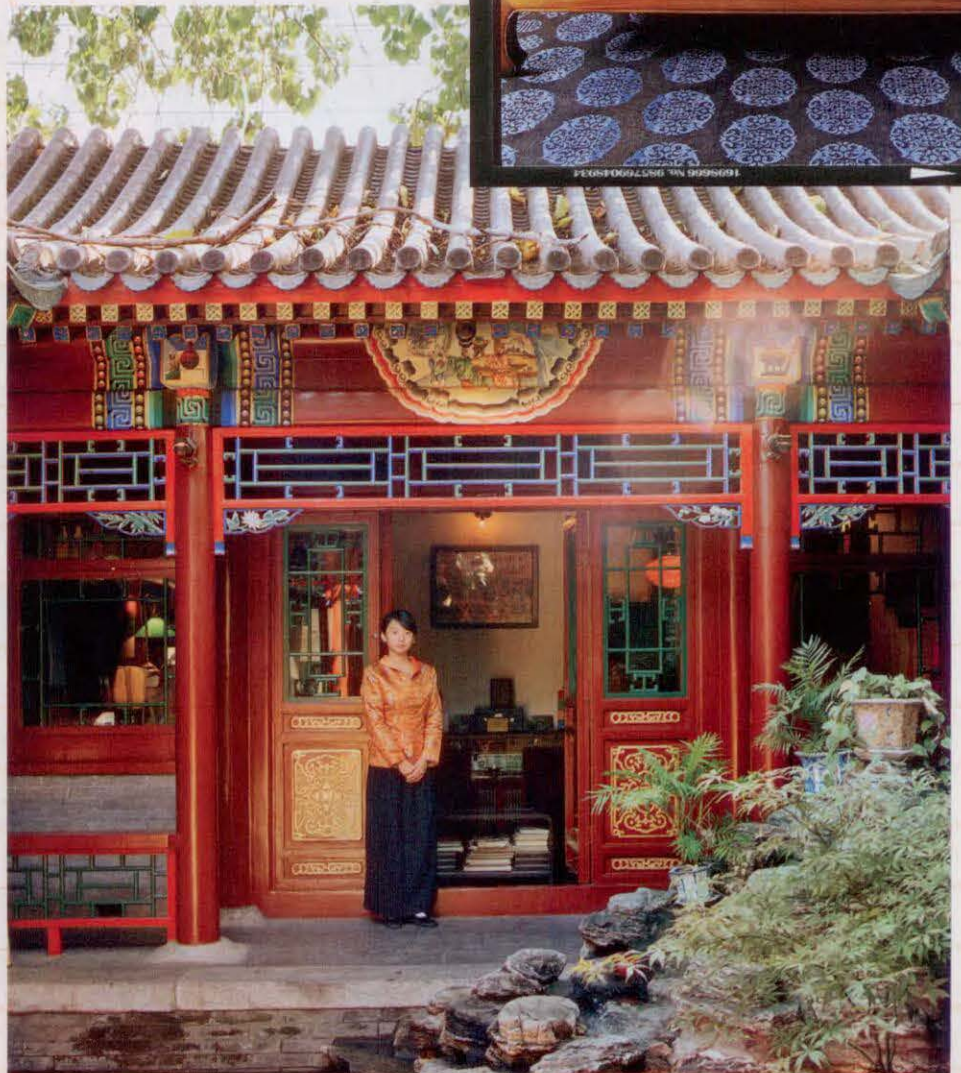
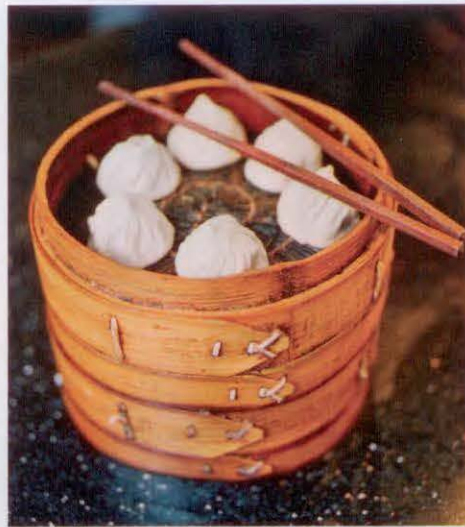
THE EXPERTS... FAMILY

► curving and astonishing. Our guide made sure we found the least crowded part, starting at the Mutianyu section, which has some of the prettiest views. We then took the cable car, followed by an hour-long walk. 'This is the best holiday ever. I want to move to China,' said Octavia as we descended.

AFTER THE GREAT WALL, it was a short flight to China's former capital, Xi'an, to see the Terracotta Warriors – burial companions for its first emperor, Qin Shi Huang Di, who started on his mausoleum when he was 13, in the year 246BC. At the site, we bumped into the elderly farmer who had discovered the statues while digging for water in 1974. The warriors are utterly transfixed in scale, number and beauty. The pits in which they stand, and where thousands more remain hidden, are as mesmerising as the pyramids of Giza.

We stayed at the former People's Hotel, now the Sofitel, which has the most brilliant concierge whose local knowledge will find you everything from a spare part for an electric razor to the finest duck. We were sent off to hire bicycles to ride along the top of the city walls: at nine miles long, they're one of the world's largest ancient city defence systems. We pedalled on tandems past gleaming glass towers overshadowing the few remaining tiled houses. For 90 minutes, we raced around high above Xi'an, weaving through myriad locals and Chinese tourists as the sun set, an orange glow on a city that has seen the rise and fall of the Tang dynasty.

The scale of China hit us again and again: it's simply jaw-dropping. Xi'an has nine million people; other cities we had never heard of have populations even greater. Britain suddenly felt rather small and the central axis of the world not so certain as when we left London. In Shanghai, as we roared along the side streets of the old French quarter on three 1950s motorcycles with sidecars, my children fantasised that we were in a Far Eastern hybrid of *Mad Max 2* and *Easy Rider*. 'Ni-hao,' they yelled at the traffic lights to a bemused policeman. Dumpling sellers stopped to stare. In a city where the shiniest skyscrapers loom over traditional alleys and market stalls, you could see the 18th





century being eclipsed by the 21st. But somehow those old bikes provided the raw romance and excitement we craved in high-octane China.

Finally, we headed up into the bamboo forests in the mountains at Moganshan, a former colonial hill station but now Shanghai's answer to the Hamptons. Here, a French adventurer and his chic Hong Kong Chinese wife have created Le Passage Mohkan Shan, a rural retreat with Provençal furniture, freshly baked croissants, and escargots and truffles that would give any Parisian brasserie a run for its money. We took the 999-step trek up the hill via temples, peanut farmers and stunning views. With its cool swimming pool and tea-plantation panoramas – authentic, individual and refreshing after the glare and glitz of Shanghai – it was the perfect spot to wind down.

DURING OUR TIME IN CHINA, we learnt to listen hard as everything we knew – or thought we knew – about the country was challenged. Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the People's Republic, famously said when asked about the effectiveness of the French Revolution

that it was too early to tell. China is a nation that thinks deep and big, right down to the electronic loos at the Park Hyatt Beijing, which provoked teenage titters with their options for rear or front cleansing, oscillating, pulsating or soft, as well as a dryer. And where else in the world would you check into your hotel on the 87th floor, choose your own maggots for lunch, and have a pair of prescription glasses made in 15 minutes? Our summer was made in China. 📍

Cleveland Collection (+44 20 7843 3531; www.clevelandcollection.co.uk) can arrange a nine-night stay in China from £2,540 per adult and £1,095 per child, based on a family of four. This includes British Airways flights, transfers and three nights each at the Park Hyatt Beijing, the Shangri-La Xian and the Grand Hyatt Shanghai on a bed-and-breakfast basis. A two-night extension at Le Passage Mohkan Shan costs from £600 per adult and £150 per child on a bed-and-breakfast basis. ➤

Clockwise from opposite: Red Capital Residence in Beijing; Xiao Long Bao soup dumplings; Aman at Summer Palace; inside the Temple of Heaven, Beijing; 798 Art Zone



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