

Visiting Family in China

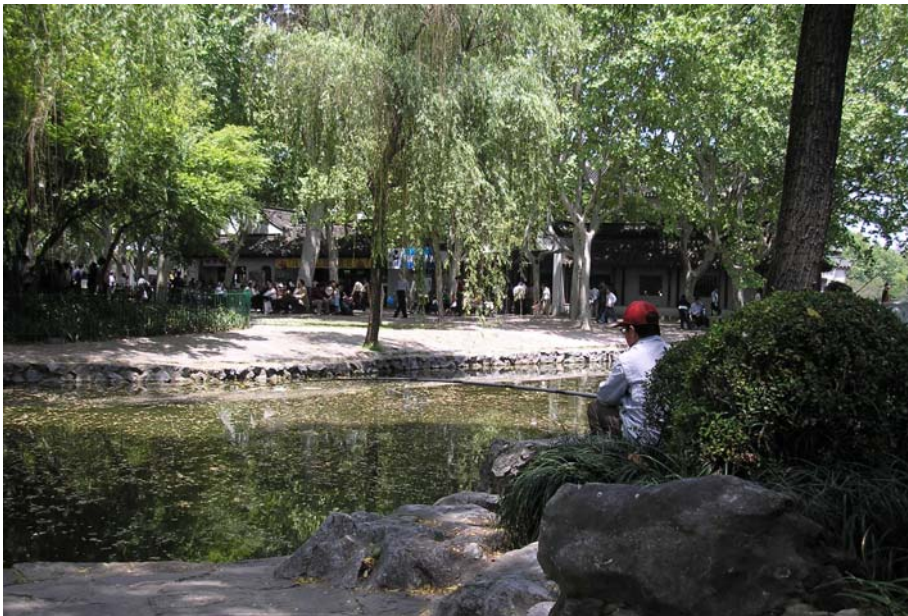
Who goes to China without seeing the Great Wall? Me. The reason for my trip was to visit my son Chris and his girlfriend Alainna. They moved to Shanghai in 2005.

Chris and Alainna had four weeks invested in raising an abandoned litter of kittens when I arrived. They are volunteers at a brand new animal shelter. While they offered to turn them over to another volunteer, they didn't really want to. Cat lover that I am, I didn't really want to either. The four kittens are adorable and we spent hours each day, bottle-feeding them and celebrating each milestone (Spot just used the litter box! Ellie just ate dry food soaked in formula, etc.) When I returned home they only had to break through the final "drink from a water bowl" barrier. At first, we had to be back every four hours, but later they were independent enough to fend for themselves for a stretch of six or seven hours.



Because I stayed with a friend who lived at the opposite end of Shanghai, I became familiar with taxis and the metro. Chris and Alainna took good care of me, running off to get effective Chinese medicine for the one thing I didn't bring meds for, providing me with a cell phone and a well endowed metro card. They would text message the Chinese characters for the place we were to meet. Then, I'd show this tiny cell phone screen to the poor cab driver (one had to keep putting on his reading glasses to see, but he was totally good natured about it).

I especially enjoyed LuXun Park, pictured above. It is a beautiful place, alive with activities at all hours of the day. I got up early to watch groups of people doing Tai Chi and some kind of similar sword



dance/exercise. It was fun to see. About a hundred couples were practicing ballroom dancing in a big section of the park. There were always two to four individuals or groups making different kinds of, usually, traditional Chinese music. The schools bring the children to the park during their lunchtime break. There are bumper and paddleboats, remote controlled

boats, a karaoke teahouse, and arts & crafts for the kids. It really is an amazing place.

Each day we explored a different neighborhood. We walked through a labyrinth of alleys and what looked to me to be very old and rustic housing. Any alley that's big enough (and that is a very relative

term) becomes a little market with residents selling produce, fish (still swimming around in plastic bins), and prepared foods.

We went on to a shopping district -- not slick and modern. Think about the markets and street vendors in Mexico or New York's Chinatown or down along Canal Street and you'll get a little bit of the flavor.

We walked along the street below an elevated highway and the rather wide lane for pedestrians, motor cycles, scooters, and bikes was packed and ran in both directions with absolutely no order like staying right or left. I attempted to shoot a movie with my little camera but it didn't capture the sense of chaos.

Like many cities, Shanghai seems to have neighborhoods devoted to a particular business or activity. One day we through what was clearly wedding row. Chinese weddings were not entirely clear to me -- there seems to be the legal ceremony, the celebration and the picture taking/wedding book production -- three very separate activities. We saw fancy cars parked along the street, usually black, with an arrangement of flowers on the hood of the car and individual roses scotch taped at various other points. A few of the cars were red firebirds with Ferrari stickers on the front.

There were countless shops selling/renting beautiful gowns in a stunning variety, along with shops that just sell lace or flowers or fasteners. Weddings involve many changes of clothes, including traditional Chinese dress and the long white wedding gown. Even the bride's clothes are usually rented rather than purchased. There were women outside the shops washing whole wedding gowns in little plastic laundry tubs and then hanging them on the line, strung between trees or between a road sign and building, inside out. Obviously they'd have to be pressed and perhaps some sequins would have to be repaired -- no problem since they do that work too. Mind boggling to me.

One day we went apartment shopping. Chris and Alainna want a place close to convenient mass transit but otherwise have very different criteria than most apartment hunters. They want an area that is more Chinese, in the heart of street food vendors and open-air markets (but not down-wind of them). Convenience and aliveness are more important than quiet, modern anything, or lushness. They have to stress this for the realtors to believe them.



We could count on Chris to scout out something to eat every 2-3 hours. With all the walking I only gained two pounds. We ate at major restaurants, holes in the wall, and, finally, street food. I tried, against my better judgment, eel tempura and octopus balls. From the street food vendors, we enjoyed a crepe thing, prepared on a big flat griddle -- sort of like the ones used in Mexico to make tortillas. The cook spread some batter, very thinly, cracked an egg on it, sprinkled scallions and little bits of other stuff, added some plum sauce, then a crunchy something, folded it all up and stuck it in a bag. Yumm!

We also sampled skewers of meat, crawfish, various types of dumplings, fried rice, noodles, pastries and Middle Eastern breads.

We had a tea tasting and bought a bit of a green and a red tea. It was a fun experience, an elaborate process. I'm sure they'd be horrified if they realized that I usually make tea in a great big mug and douse it with milk and sugar!

We hung out in coffee/tea houses and played Uno and Gin Rummy. Chris and I had full massages and foot and scalp massages on different days -- nice and very different from a salon or therapeutic massage here.

We went to karaoke place (a first for me) with private rooms with a comfortable couch facing the screen that displays the words to the songs along with, sometimes, inane videos. It was fun, especially watching Alainna. She particularly liked to pick pop tunes in Japanese and Chinese (she's a linguist, fluent in both languages).

Chris and I went to Yu Gardens and had a great time taking pictures. My friend Sherry took me to the shikumen museum, and the "antiques," fakes (the fake part is the designer labels) and fabric markets.

China is the place to have clothes custom made. I ordered a pair of black silk-linen blend slacks for about \$10 and a couple of jackets for about \$8 to \$20 depending on style and fabric. Everything was done on time except the slacks. Since I was



flying home the next day, the shop delivered them that night at 9pm to Chris' door. I was impressed with their customer service and suspect that the slacks were made that afternoon.

At the end of my trip Alainna loaded Chinese/English dictionary software onto my pocket PC (<http://www.hnhsoft.com>). It's terrific. I can put in an English word and it displays the pinyin, Chinese characters and speaks the word so I learn how to pronounce it. If they're going to live there indefinitely, I'd like to attempt to learn enough Chinese to communicate with a taxi cab driver.

Finally, we took the maglev (magnetic levitation) demonstration train to the airport. We could have just taken a cab to the airport and even though it was more expensive to take a cab and then the train it was well worth it. The train reaches speeds of 260 miles per hour. See this site for pictures and more information <http://www.gluckman.com/Maglev.html>

I plan to go back and my husband's interest is piqued. Next time we'll spend some time on a family visit in Shanghai and will also investigate other areas (some small village of a mere two to four million people, the Great Wall, Beijing, etc.) so that we get more of sense of China and not just Shanghai. And it's always great to come home, enjoy a hot dog with mustard and really appreciate modern western-style public toilets.