

Beijing

This is a very preliminary writeup 11/07; to be edited and expanded.

We left for China on 9/19 as planned and returned on 10/6. What an incredible trip even though the temperature was never lower than 88 to well over 90 degrees F with humidity of about 90% - unbelievably hot. This was my third and Don's second trip to China in the last 17 years. There have been unbelievable changes between my first trip and our second trip and now this trip. After my first trip I wanted Don to go with me (about 5 years later) to see a third world country. The biggest shock for me was that within those five years the eastern part of the country had gone from third world to first world and now this time the whole country (that we saw) is first world -truly amazing. We didn't like Beijing as much as previously - just too big and noisy - although our hotel was in a great place - in a quiet real Chinese residential neighborhood. Of course we liked the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace and Tian'anmen Square - but the city had too many signs and, huge buildings, and red decorations lights - and thousands of annoying street merchants selling pseudo Rolex watches for \$1.00. We would say "no" and they would just keep after us following for maybe a block with more joining them.

While in Beijing great changes have and are occurring. Buildings more than thirty years old are being replaced with taller buildings and huge commercial buildings. As Don said, many of the apartment buildings look Soviet styled - much the same. The new apartment buildings as well as the old ones are made of limestone and possibly poor construction.

I was told that there was a farmers market near our hotel and that it opened at 5:30 AM. I wanted to see this since I am on the Board of our local farmers market. So I left the hotel in the near dark and walked in the direction which I thought I was told to go. There was no farmers market there, but it was an old interesting area. There were many dark gray residences in a hutong area. (The Mongolian word hutong originally referred to a well or central square, now it means the old one and two story neighborhoods.)

The old hutong residences and shops which were the main residences in Beijing are being knocked down and replaced by new apartment buildings. So many have been removed that the city has had to set aside one area of these residences and build a wall around it so that they will be preserved. The hutong area is sometimes seedy, but shows how the Chinese people lived. They are very tiny one story buildings (usually old dirty gray) - one attached to the other. They are in clusters and often the bathroom facilities are in a small central building for all to use. Some of the later built houses have their own toilet. The houses are so small that the residents spend a great deal of time out of doors. As soon as they get out of bed, they go outside and eat there, play there, visit with neighbors, and try to stay cool. I don't know what they do in the winter.

(Comment from Don... the hutong area reminded me somewhat of the alleys in Gunnison. The differences are that there are fewer "main" streets, there may be several parallel small streets or alleys for each larger street. And the households (which often are joined buildingsm one or two stories) face toward

these narrow streets, in some cases including a small business such as a repair shop. With the new profusion of cars, traffic squeezing through can be entertaining. My impression of the average house was better than Margaret's, I thought where we ate lunch was very pleasant. We were told many older residents preferred these familiar locations to the high rise apartment towers, but many of the hutongs have been torn down for redevelopment.)

The next day I asked our guide again about the location of the farmers market. He told me to go on the same street, but in the opposite direction. This time Don came with me and we found a fabulous market laid out on a very narrow street with cars, motor cycles, bicycles and lots of people – and all of the merchant's marvelous looking fruits and vegetables in this very narrow street. We took many photos of the markets and walked there for several blocks. This market is open daily from 5 AM until about 7:30 or 8 AM. There was meat hanging outside, fruits, veggies, dumpling makers, little restaurants outside, bicycle repair men working on the street with no shops etc. It was very interesting and a good view of more traditional Chinese life. (Don again... the quality of the vegetables in particular looked very good. I love Chinese vegetables, they must have twice as many varieties as we do.)

Then we went to Badaling and the Great Wall. That town also had changed. The first time I was there, there was only one restaurant and gift shop - no street vendors. The second time there were a few more vendors. This time it was blocks of one vendor after another with the worst quality merchandise possible. It was non-stop haggling and even then you got ripped off. The first time I went, I climbed the Wall with a few other people and climbed farther than anyone else in the group, the second time Don went farther than I, this time Don and one other fellow climbed as far as one could climb and I fell on a step before we even got to the Wall so didn't climb it. There were masses of people. (Don... I decided to climb as high as our cardiologist elderhosteler; not quite to the top but the cars below looked like ants so it must have been at least 500 feet? A hard climb! I think I went somewhat higher the last time but I was ten years younger.)

While in Beijing we saw the opening ceremonies building for the 2008 Olympics. It is a strange, but interesting, metal sculptured building. If the Olympics are to be held in the summer, people will die from the heat - literally. Early spring would be the best time. The entire city is green - very green, no dirt - just solid green and flowers. Actually all of the cities were that way.