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A CAUTIONARY TALE: EXPLORING MYTHS ON DOMINICAN SPONSORED TRIP TO CHINA

ALEXIS MCBRIDE



I am submitting this cautionary tale to the wary traveler. Be prepared for some surprises and be open for new ideas. These are a few things I learned:

1) There is no such thing as an easy credit.

I admit that it was naive to expect easy credits. I should have predicted extensive reading for class preparation, a trip journal that would swallow two weeks of my life and a fourteen page paper that would entail hours of research and writing. But it was worth doing, I thought,

as I embarked feeling abundantly prepared for the sights, sounds and smells of China.

2) The female is actually not an endangered species.

The restriction of the one child per family law, in effect since 1979, coupled with the continuing societal preference for male children were topics extensively covered in our classes. I grew to view women in China as an endangered species. I then marveled at the millions of women in China and saw how cherished all children, both boys and girls, were. Our most memorable experience was being approached by a precocious ten year old Chinese girl who began her extensive conversation with us by asking us in perfect English “Are you hungry?” We responded with questions of our own. She ran off to consult with her more timid, slightly older cousin, but kept returning with even more questions and comments.

3) The Chinese public idolize the late Mao Tse Tung.

While Mao’s picture hangs prominently in Tian An Men Square just outside the Forbidden City, we were told that this is the only public image of Chairman Mao remaining in China. However, this is not to suggest that junky memorabilia are banned. Mao watches, hats, and Red Book are hawked on the streets. If the purchase of such memorabilia is a sign of idolatry, than Mao is my guy.

4) I thought language barriers would make travel by public transportation impossible.

Near the end of the trip, my husband and I were still alive and were beginning to feel a bit more confident. Having conquered the London, Paris, St. Petersburg and Moscow

subways, we ventured underground. We reached our chosen stop with help from both the English signs and instructions and the smiling, polite Chinese showing us where to deposit our coins.

5) I expected to see Chinese cities as vast collections of dreary high rises and clogged arterial streets.

Shanghai is an amazing city which has been totally rebuilt with so many shining skyscrapers that New York, by comparison, looks like a hick town. But what was even more surprising was that individual planter boxes, filled with thriving greenery, were attached to every segment of the massive freeway system linking the city. I was depressed when I returned to find the dead grasses surrounding California freeways.

6) I anticipated a restful scenic cruise down the Li River.

We have all seen those beautiful serene pictures with the flat topped mountains in the background and the Chinese man steering his primitive raft down the river. A cruise down the River Li promised this, but the Li was a lie. The river is a vast freeway of enormous boats over-flowing with tourists. Rafts are piloted by entrepreneurial vendors scrambling on the tourist boats, hanging onto the windows selling souvenirs.

7) The selling of goods and merchandise in China is a controlled and highly ordered practice.

It is impossible to prepare for your first descent from the tour bus. The tourist is immediately surrounded by tens, if not hundreds, of Chinese men, women and children pressing upon you with outstretched hands, watches, bags, postcards, brushes, scarves, hats, bottled drinks and all matter of merchandise yelling "One dollah" or "You like?" or "Cheap" or "Hello." A polite and firm "No" in English or Chinese has no effect. The stalking, shoving, and shouting follow and surround you. A purchase is not a solution; you become labeled as a target and more vendors descend. The only reprieve is the arrival of another bus load of tourists. Your entourage can be reduced only by pretending that you are Marie Antoinette on the way to the guillotine; it will feel like it so it won't be that difficult. Look straight ahead, neither to the left nor right and avoiding eye contact at all costs.

8) The only danger of eating in strange restaurants is that you do not know what you are eating.

Well, perhaps that wasn't chicken after all, but identifying the type of food was not the problem. Mass feedings at enormous restaurants was getting a bit monotonous, so my husband and I found a little restaurant near our hotel that pictured what we Westerners call a "Mongolian hot pot." It required an individualized ordering of broth, meat, vegetables, and condiments. The offer of only limited English assistance made this difficult but eventually the pot, broth, and duck arrived at our table. The duck was immersed in the broth and after what seemed a suitable period of time, I lifted a piece of duck from the broth with my chop sticks, chewed, and swallowed. Tried to swallow. Chinese meat, fish and fowl is actually quite easy to identify because it usually comes with bones and other identifying parts. This duck arrived coarsely chopped in bony pieces. One of the bones would not go down, it caught in my throat and although I

could breathe the bone would not move. Rice, water, and soda appeared at our table and I was told to eat and drink to dislodge the bone. I quickly became the restaurant entertainment, many peering over a balcony to observe my dilemma; I weakly smiled and waved. After the longest five minutes of my life a combination of dumplings and Diet Pepsi joined forces and down the bone went. There were no cheers from the audience; I shudder to think what they expected. Needless to say, I lost my appetite so we found a cab and returned to our hotel. How does a Chinese diner deal with the small bones that inevitability accompany every dish? Attempting to learn from my near death experience I watched. The polite, Chinese diner spits them out, in a napkin or onto their chopsticks.

This is not the definitive guide to China. The trip was guided and I am sure that we were shown a China that the Chinese government wanted us to see. There are also other important topics that could be addressed. A sequel could include the practice of toilet training in China with comments on the interface between Chinese toilet facilities and the Western tourist. But surprises make a trip interesting and I urge you to take advantage of the travel programs offered by Dominican and surprise yourself.