

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



500 MILLION BIKES



There are more than 500 million bicycles in China. And 90 million of the people who pedal those bicycles share the surname Li. That's right, 90 million Li's! Imagine what their phonebooks must look like? I mean, in the U.S. of A. there are only 2.4 million Smiths, the most common family name amongst English-speakers ...

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. But my mind was full of these stats one hot Friday afternoon as I sat in the back seat of a tired red taxi, waiting and sweating while swarms of Li's, Zhangs, Lius and Wangs pedalled past us at every Beijing intersection.

Of China's 1.35 billion citizens (stand 'em side-by-side, they'd stretch 19 times around the world!) roughly 21 million are crammed into the country's capital. And there's evidence everywhere – roadworks, demolition sites, cranes galore, bamboo scaffolding clinging to glass and concrete towers – that this fast-paced, two-minute-noodle metropolis has more than caught up on the rest of us.

My cab driver wasn't bothered by the stats or the traffic. In fact, he was singing to himself. Some kind of Chinese marching song, from the sound of it.

"It's smoggy, isn't it," I tried.



"Wah?" he puzzled, peering at me in the mirror.

"It's very smoggy this afternoon," I repeated, louder and slower.

"Wah?"

"Smoggy – you know, foggy, cloudy." I pointed out the window.

"Oh," he said, smiling and nodding and waving his arms. "Go roun' here. To hotel okay? Not far soon!"

I gave up on smog and went back to my stats. And he went back to his marching song ...

Beijing was born around 1000BC as a frontier trading town for Mongol, Korean and Chinese tribes. It was burnt to the ground in 1215AD by grim old Genghis Khan, who had it rebuilt for his nice young grandson, Kublai. The city was overthrown again, mid-14th-century, by Chinese rebels – and the Ming Dynasty kicked off. Then the Qing Dynasty arrived with Manchu invaders (17th century) and gave the city a face-lift. And ...

And so on and so forth – right up to Mao Zedong's infamous Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when Beijing's relics, walls, temples and architecture got yet another beating-up.

But happy days are here again! Beijing's only invaders in the 21st century have been tourists, and the city's youthful hordes (according to my travel book) "are mixing Latin salsa with trad jazz and pop fizz with British punk, and consuming the whole thing with chopsticks and a side order of *McMuffins*."

I'd also read that Beijing's attractions aren't just big or bigger – they're BIGGEST!

- the biggest gathering place in the world – Tiananmen Square, made famous by Mao and his Red Guard parades of up to one million people
- the biggest palace in the world – the Forbidden City
- the biggest temple in the world – the Temple of Heaven



- the biggest garden in the world – the Summer Palace
- and the biggest wall in the world – the Great Wall of China.

They say you can see the Great Wall from the moon! (You actually can't.)

But, two days later, as I clambered around on top of it (the wall – not the moon), I could see why the myth persists. This ancient, man-made wonder is bigger and longer and mind-boggling-er than anything I'd ever imagined!"

It was misty that Sunday, as the highway west from Beijing took us deep into rugged, bush-smothered mountains. At one place, small Chinese pagodas dotted the hillside. At another, a big Buddhist temple was under repair. But suddenly THE WALL appeared, snaking along the highest ridges, plunging down gorges and up vertical cliffs, disappearing over here only to reappear over there.

A most amazing sight? Oh boy, was it ever!

Construction began more than 2000 years ago (before Christ) on the orders of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, and completed

yonks later during the Ming Dynasty. It was built by hand by one million peasants, who heaved great blocks of rock up these steep slopes, and added battle-forts on each towering peak to fend off horse-riding hordes from the north.

The Wall zigs and zags its way from the Yellow Sea to the Gobi Desert, stretching a total of 6000 kilometres. (Three times the length of New Zealand!) And chunks of it have been restored for visitors who want to crawl all over it.

Which, of course, I did.

The panoramic views were breath-taking. And so was the steep climb. I puffed and panted up a squillion giant steps ... rested/collapsed often ... had my photo taken high in the clouds (dressed as a general in the Chinese army) ... and vowed to, one day, return.

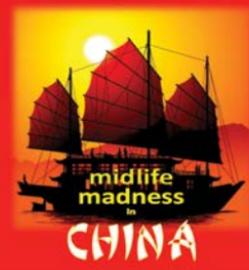
I mean, there are some things you just can't take-in, first time around. 🍇



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