

The Year of The Horse



China 2014

Nick and Jessica moved to China in June of 2013 and are figuring on being there at least two years. I hated to see them go, but I have to admit it sounded like a lot of fun. I figured that I would give them time to get settled in and check things out and then I would visit. Six months later I got to thinking about that visit. Chinese New Year was coming up and both Nick and Jessica would have a few days off so we decided that would be a good time for the visit. Also, Bobbe decided that she needed to see Jessica, Nick and China and so she would be coming along. This was decided at Thanksgiving so we bought the tickets, sent off our passports for the required visa and started getting ready.

It was \$700 less to fly out of Denver compared to OKC so driving to Denver seemed the thing to do. I drove up a few days early to allow time for errands and such also with an eye on unpredictable weather. We were flying out on Monday the 27th and snow was forecast. It did snow but nothing serious, we left early and had no problems leaving the truck in long term parking with a shuttle to the terminal. The crowds were light and we had no problems with security, didn't even have to take off belts or shoes. After security we had a nice breakfast found the gate and waited. The plane left more or less on time and it was a typical flight.

One interesting part, while over Utah I would be willing to bet that I saw the route that we had taken to and from California. The reason I think it is that west of Delta Utah there is a wind farm sitting out in the middle of nowhere with the road around it which has an unusual pattern. That is not earth shattering, but it was about the only thing interesting about the flight.

On arrival in San Francisco we found our gate and found out our plane was going to be late. With nothing to do but wait, we did. Eventually the plane arrived, was serviced, we boarded and off we went. The plane was loaded and all in all it was an uneventful, very long flight. I will say that the Air China seats were roomier than the United seats. Not by much, but every bit counts. Also, the flight attendants worked very hard serving two meals as well as drinks. Also, it seems the attendants come in matched sets of 4.

We arrived in Beijing after about 8 days flying time about 5 hours late and found our connecting plane had left on its schedule. We followed the signs, went through immigrations with no problems and got directions as to what to do. We reclaimed our bags, rechecked them, confirmed our flight the next day and took a bus to a very nice motel. As a side note, in China, it seems, heating of public spaces, motel lobbies etc, is kept to a minimum. The folks working in the hotel lobby all had on long heavy coats. As a second side note a nice person in the airport took pity on me and showed me how to work the pay phones and it turned out calling Jessica and Nick to tell them about the change of plans was a free call. Also, the phones had a button to push to get everything in English.

The next morning we got up early, jet lag had us and we both woke up about 4 in the morning. So after finding the restaurant and having breakfast we caught a bus to the airport, arriving way early. We settled in to kill some time with coffee and people watching. Styles change everywhere. It seems that for the ladies in this part of China if you are covered up top showing no cleavage you can let it all hang out below, and they do. Lots of very short shorts with leggings, some exceedingly short skirts with hose and over the knee boots. This style was seen on women of all ages. Also, we discovered getting coffee we were used to was probably not going to happen, and forget about refills.

Eventually we headed for the gate and went through security with only a little trouble. They took my mustache scissors and we found out that Chinese security has no problem with patting you down, male or female. On the plus side you can leave your shoes and belts on. While waiting at the gate I again took advantage of the free phone to let Nick and Jessica know when we would arrive. The flight to Chengdu was uneventful. Nick and Jessica were easy to pick out of the crowd and the bags arrived with no drama. Hugs all around and we loaded up for the short trip to their apartment.

After a short pause we loaded up and went over to the Tibetan area for a little lunch. It looked like some place out of a movie and the food was interesting. Now I can say that I have had Yak butter tea. Nick and Jessica have picked up a fair amount of Chinese and did all of the talking for us which was a good idea as all Bobbe or myself could have done was point.

After lunch we walked around looking at what was to be seen. We eventually went in to see the Tomb of Liu Bei who, I am sure all of you know was the founder of the Shu dynasty. It is a large and very elaborate thing right there inside the city. It has a series of buildings with all sorts of larger than life size statues. They also had a gift shop with some very interesting and large woodworking items. I would like to know how they can dry pieces of wood that large without any shrinking or cracking. As we got to the north side of the facility we saw the full on New Year's set up: all sorts of fantastic figures, animals, and who knows what, all lit up, people coming from all over and all sorts of stuff to buy.

However, it was getting late with jet lag was kicking in so we headed back to the apartment. Bobbe, Nick and Jessica set around talking and having a drink. Myself, I mostly dropped in and out of sleep. Eventually we all hit the rack and I can't speak for anyone else, but I for sure slept well.

At the urging of Jessica's driver we had agreed to go see the Pandas early and it turned out to be a good idea. First off, everyone loves Pandas and they do a bang up job of putting them on show. The facility is on the outskirts of Chengdu. It is large, well done and well maintained.



It like most everything else we saw was done up in decorations for the New Years. As you can see in the photo, it was nearly empty, and as the coats show, it was a little cool. Here are all four of the intrepid

explorers. This was snapped by a nice man. This would be a good time to point out that by and large the people were very nice, polite and friendly. We were a source of interest to most of the folks. It was quite usual to see someone giving lengthy looks especially Nick and me. In fact, it got downright funny on more than one occasion. People would be walking along and see us and then do a double take. The adults tried to not be obvious, not so the kids. They would just stop and stare, size was one issue and Nick's red beard got a good deal of attention also.



We took all sorts of photos of the Pandas, these are what they called sub-adults and they are just learning to be on their own. Pandas pretty much only eat one type of bamboo and that is all they eat. Bamboo is pretty low in nutrients and their digestive system is not so good, so they have to eat a lot of bamboo. About all they do is eat and sleep. If they weren't so cute they would already be



extinct. They have an almost opposable thumb and using that they grab a handful of bamboo leaves and eat them like taking a bite out of a hot dog. They also had some little ones that were born in August and they were walking around.

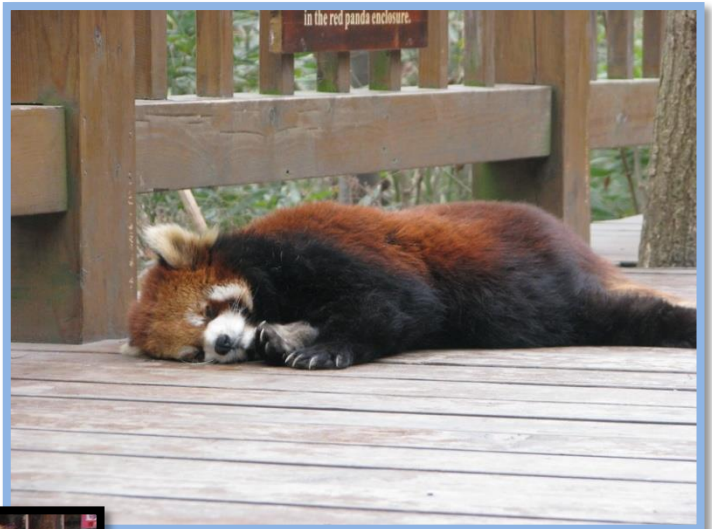


This guy is a Red Panda. Interestingly, these were discovered first and were called Pandas. Then they found the black and white Pandas so they changed this one to the Red Panda and just called the others Pandas. You can see from the tail that this one looks pretty much like a Raccoon and they should. Neither of the Pandas are actually bears, both are broadly members of the same family as the Raccoons.

The Red Pandas are quite a bit smaller

than the Pandas and within their enclosure they are free to run around. There are signs all over warning not to bother them as they can be "somewhat ferocious" and they do have teeth so I would not suggest bothering them.

This old boy was not in the least stressed out. He is taking a nice nap on the platform and if the visitors don't like it that is their problem. He was alive but he didn't move never mind a flock of folks taking his photo.



After getting all of the Panda cuteness we could handle it was time to head on back to town. There



is a Buddhist area that we had decided to check out. Once again the driver dropped us off in a good place and we just wandered around looking at things. Chengdu folks really go for the open air food stands. This type of thing is common. Fried something on a stick, has to be good.



As I said, this the Buddhist area of the city, temples of all sorts all over with Monks of all ages running around. This is the main building and at first look seems old. However, according to the sign on the building it was built in 1999. That would be around the time the government started slacking off on putting down religion. There were lots of folks like us wandering around

looking at everything with lots of places to sit down and contemplate things.

While here Nick and I were standing together just looking around. A two/three year old little boy was walking towards his father when he looked up and saw us he froze as if he couldn't believe his eyes. At least he didn't start crying.

We walked all over, looking at everything until our feet were about done. Jessica's driver had arranged to meet us at a certain time and place which is real handy. We headed back to the apartment at the end of a long and interesting day. As I had gotten a good night's sleep and was pretty much over the jet lag I hope I was more interesting company than I had been the night before.



The next morning we were not in a hurry and Jessica and Nick slept in. Bobbe and I woke up at our usual time. Without her morning cup of coffee Bobbe can get cranky so I walked over to the 7/11 and scored a couple of cups of Americano, black, which is as close to a cup of coffee as we were going to get. I also successfully withdrew some funds from an ATM which made me feel better. I was not sure that was going to work. The coffee was delivered and drank and I decided to take a stroll around and see what things looked like on the ground.



This is the best Tex-Mex place in Chengdu. You have to ask yourself, how good does it have to be to be the best in Chengdu? Well, we tried the best Mexican food in Whitehorse Yukon, so why not here. After everyone eventually got up we did try it, and it was not bad. It also is not what most of us would call Tex-Mex but the waitress was wearing a shirt like a Texas flag and they did have the Confederate Stars and Bars on the wall and different decorations around so, considering where it is, it is good Tex-Mex.

After breakfast we were heading to the Jinsha Archeological site and were

taking the subway to get there. We could have had the driver take us but we wanted to see how the locals got around. The subway was just a short walk from Peter's and it turned out to be very nice. The subway was clean, quick and not very crowded. We had to change trains once, but overall it worked very well and it was only a short interesting walk to the site. This is the entrance to the site, and as it shows, these folks were in full New Year's mode with decorations, entertainment and food booths all over the place. This place lets seniors in free. Bobbe had her passport and got in free, I didn't and they were not impressed by my driver's license so I had to pay.



I was looking forward to seeing Jinsha. I had never heard of it. It was only discovered in 2001 while they were doing excavation for a housing development. The site is from around 1000 BC and is quite extensive. They have excavated quite a bit of it and it is all under a large building. Again, the signs were also in English which of I was very glad. During the excavation they found a whole bunch of stuff. Interestingly they found a buried stash of elephant ivory and some rhinoceros horns. This is interesting as there were, as far as is known, no elephants or rhinoceros native to this area.



That means that there was trade over great distances; much more than normally thought. Those elephants didn't just walk up from Burma or India and offer up their tusks. Also, given the size of China, there has been very little done in the way of Archeological excavation and there is no telling what is still to be found.



After looking around and seeing everything that we could see it was time to leave. We walked back to the subway station and rode down to a large square to see the largest statue of Chairman Mao, and it is indeed a large one. Here we are half a world away and about the only thing you can say is that a politician is a politician no matter where.

On the plus side there was also had a very large and nice dancing water fountain display. Also, something that was getting more common, several friendly folks came up and started speaking with Nick and he got to take some

photos. I guess you can say he has a friendly face. Also, he works on speaking Chinese and the folks like that and they get to practice their English on him.

Jessica had to work that night so we headed back to the apartment on the subway and discussed the events. Nick was going to go with Jessica and Bobbe and I would come later and would not stay for the whole show. We worked that out quite handily. Nick had a business card with the hotel's address in Chinese. I would just show that to the taxi driver and there you go. To get back Nick had an old phone that he texted the apartment address in Chinese. Again, I just showed that to the driver and away we went. It worked out very well. The Ritz Carlton is a very nice hotel and of course, Jessica put on a good show. We stayed for one set and then headed back to the apartment and settled in for the night. I sort of woke up to let Nick and Jessica in but didn't stay awake long. Walking over 5 miles a day helps you sleep at night.

The next morning Bobbe and I were up early so I repeated the fetching coffee drill. Don't want Bobbe to get cranky. Then I took off for a stroll. I figured

that if I keep making right turns you can't get very lost. I stopped off to buy some pastries and coffee in an open shop just to see if I could, and I could. Waving and pointing works and with the white beard everyone wants to help the old man.



After I got back to the apartment we elected to go back over to Peter's Tex-Mex for a late breakfast and discuss what we were going to do for the day.

After a good “Tex-Mex” breakfast we were leaving and I scared this little girl. She appears about six or so. She and her family were coming in while we were coming out, she looked and saw me and her jaw just dropped. She recovered nicely and we high fived and then she was good and even smiled for the photo.

We were going over to the Tibetan area, this time to the shopping part. Again, Jessica’s driver let us out and we started walking around looking.

Bobbe bought a nice brass bowl that you can rub and it will make sounds, no genie, but it has some meaning.

The Tibetans do a lot of very fancy metal work of all types.

They also like to make their religious icons look very scary, just the thing to give the kids nightmares.



This guy with Nick is just one of several who wanted their photo taken with Nick. We even got our photo taken with a Monk.

When Mona was here she had sold some of her jewelry to a shop in this area. She liked the deal so much she sent some more jewelry with me for Jessica and Nick to sell to the same guy. We went into the shop and had tea and they got to talking. We hadn’t brought the jewelry but Nick took a taxi home and brought it

back

on the electric bike. It was obvious this was going to take

a while so

Bobbe and I took another taxi to the apartment and left the folks to

their haggling. We took this opportunity to do a load of laundry and lay around taking it easy. Jessica and Nick returned after a bit, the deal was unfortunately not successful.

Jessica was playing again that night. Nick was going down, Bobbe took a pass and I repeated my journey of the previous night. There were more folks there than the night before and again, Jessica did a good show. After a bit, I headed back and called it an early day as in the morning we had to catch an early flight to Xi-an and the Terracotta Warriors.

And we did catch that flight, by the skin of our teeth. First, we unloaded at the wrong terminal and had to walk to the next one. We checked in and had a little misunderstanding with the baggage. Nick and I stayed to sort that out while Jessica and Bobbe went ahead. When Nick and I finally got to the gate we were almost left behind. There was no waiting. Once on the plane it was a nice flight to Xi-an. We landed on time, found the bags and headed for town through the worst smog I have ever seen. At times the visibility was less than ¼ mile and Bobbe was having breathing problems. We took a taxi to the hostel. We were too early to check in but we could and did leave the bags and found a taxi to take us to the Terracotta Warrior site, about 1 hours drive from town. The driver correctly told us that the place would be very crowded.

I have mentioned about how polite and friendly the people were, and that is correct except for one thing, standing in line. It seems that activity runs under different rules.



This is the line I was in to get tickets, Jessica was in another. I have not experienced anything similar. At first I tried to be nice and not push, it turned out that was not a good idea. So, with the idea that when in Rome and all of that stuff, I put my size to good use, got to the front and got the tickets. I felt sorry for a little girl behind me. She spoke English and was from NYC coming back for New Year's and had to be getting

squeezed to death. I offered to let her go in front but she said she was good so I left it at that.

With tickets scored we headed in. It was a fairly long uphill walk and considering the air quality it was not Bobbe's idea of a good time. Nick and Jessica had visited this place the summer they had toured through China. Of course neither Bobbe nor I had been here and I for one was looking forward to it.

When Jessica was a little girl the Chinese were just doing the initial excavations for this site. I used to read her all about it in her National Geographic bedtime stories. At that time neither of us ever figured we would see it in real life, but yet, here we both were in person. There is something to be said about seeing, in person, the actual thing. I had the same feeling when Jessica and I went to the Smithsonian and when Bobbe and I went to Newfoundland and visited Lanse Aux Meadows, and many others. Jessica has been to the Louvre and seen the Mona Lisa. She tells me it is the same feeling. It is something when you realize, that whatever you are looking at is not a replica, not a photo, it is the real thing, the one and only. That is one of the reasons I like to travel.





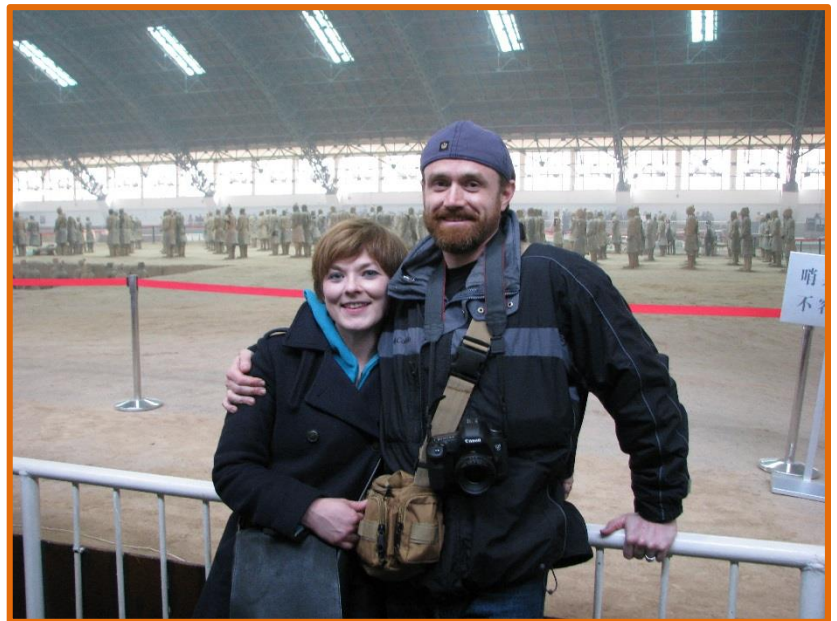
It did not disappoint even though it was very crowded and, really, you can see better photos in any number of magazines. But there is nothing like the real thing.

Here is the story, just in case.

Emperor Qin Shi Huang currently considered the first emperor of China came to the throne in the 3rd century BC at the age of 13. He wanted to do something neat, and this is it. Over the course of many years he caused to be constructed

over 8000 soldiers, numerous horses, chariots, etc, all life sized different looks hair styles and who knows what. They were placed in trenches the trenches roofed over and over the course of 2+ thousand years they were forgotten until some folks were digging a well in the 70s and came up with some strange things. They have not excavated all of the soldiers and are not going to do so for some time. It seems that the statues were originally painted and varnished. When they are dug up the colors are there for a few minutes and then flakes off. Until they figure out a way to stop that they are not going to excavate anymore.

Eventually we saw all we wanted to see, and for sure I got tired of dealing with the crowds and we headed for the exit, as they say, through the gift shop. In doing that we lost both Jessica and Bobbe each once. One of the items on display were whole animal skins of dogs. You want a German Shepard pelt, they had it. Bobbe was not impressed.



We caught a taxi back to town and had him drop us off in what was supposed to be an area with ex-pat bars. We were looking for a place where we could watch the Superbowl. The problem being that the game started at 7:00 AM local time. Nick put his best effort into it going over and above the call of duty,



but it was not to be. We settled for a drink at a less than clean looking place and then, luck was with us. We stumbled into what turned out to be, a very good hot pot meal. The pot is the smoking copper thing. In this case the pot had water in it. According to Nick, in Chengdu they use oil. At any rate, you order whatever it is you want, they bring it out, see the meat in the lower right, and then you put it in the pot and let it cook until you are happy and then pull it out and eat it. I think the thing I have in my

chopsticks is some sort of mushroom. Whatever it is, it was good, in fact the whole meal was good. With a good dinner under our belts we headed back to the hostel to settle in for the night.

The next morning Bobbe and I met in the hostel restaurant for breakfast and to see if we could do any good finding information about the Superbowl on Nick's I-Pad. It turned out that, yes we could in the form of periodic updates but no streaming. The first update we got was halftime 22-zip Seattle, and it went downhill from there. By the time we had finished our meals and coffee it was pretty much looking like a lost cause for Denver, and it turned out it was.

There is a Muslim quarter as well as a very large Mosque in Xi-an both which Nick wanted to see. After breakfast we flagged a taxi and went over to check it out. Thankfully the smog had mostly cleared out and it was looking to be a nice day. In short order we arrived at the Muslim area. We climbed out and entered the fray.



To say it was crowded would be an understatement. There were people everywhere selling about everything. Once again it was fried anything on a stick. I got some tofu which was very good. Nick got a fried banana as well as a sheep leg, complete with hoof.



These folks are making noodles. They take a wad of dough put it in a hole in the lower arm and then extrude the noodles with the top arm into the boiling water in the bowl and presto, noodles. This was out in front of a nice looking restaurant and as it was about lunch time we went in and had one of our better meals.

After that it was back out into the crowd seeing what

there was to be seen, and there was a bunch. Eventually we did find the Mosque we were looking for which is where I got the spiffy hat I am wearing in this photo. When I bought the hat the guy selling it to me insisted on a photo so we traded photos. The mosque was very old and interesting. You get to look around but there are no guides as we are used to. It is an active mosque and they were getting ready for some sort of a large dinner and they were closing the place up so we left. From there we



wandered through a few shops, Nick got some wood block prints he really liked and we then headed for the Drum Tower.



Guess what they have in the Drum Tower? Right, drums. It actually is a very old tower. In times past depending on the reason, they used the drums to let the people know what was going on. Pretty much like they used and depending on the place, still use church bells.

We got there just before they started a drum performance, by luck, not planning. It was a pretty good show. After the drum show we looked around a bit and when they started closing the place down we left and as we had a full day we headed back to the hostel.



The next day we were due to fly to Chengdu but it was going to be a late flight so we had time to look around. Unfortunately a front had blown through during the night and it was cold and windy. On the plus side the smog was significantly reduced. There is a large wall around the old part of Xi'an and Nick wanted to walk around on it. Bobbe was not doing well with the breathing thing so she elected to stay at the hostel and read a book. Nick Jessica and I buttoned

up and away we went. At first, we were at city level and the wind was not so bad. However, on top of the wall was a different story. Again, on the plus side, it cut down on the crowd. This is one of the guard towers that are at different locations all around the wall. At various places around the wall there were plaques explaining different things of interest, and all of them had English translations. We walked a couple of miles on top of the wall and it was interesting. We came down at a different location and



walked by a couple of interesting looking restaurants. We walked back to the hostel and found that Bobbe and not wandered off. As it was only three or four blocks we walked back over to one of the restaurants and had a very good meal which included some type of mushroom soup. After that we walked around a bit. The cold and damp was getting to Bobbe so she and Jessica got into a three wheeled taxi and went back to the hostel while Nick and I walked. We decided against further exploring and settled in for a wait. Eventually we ordered

up a taxi out to the airport and with no problems caught the flight back to Chengdu where we were met by the driver and went to the apartment.

With the landing our adventure was pretty much over. Nick and Jessica put themselves out showing us a very good time and Bobbe and I appreciate it. Of course, it was good to see both of them. They are working hard and enjoying themselves and having adventures of which most of us only dream. As with all adventures, some parts are better than others, but in their old age think of all they will have to look back on.

Nick and Jessica, a million thanks.

Our flight out was fairly early the next morning. The driver dropped us off at the correct terminal and as we were by now pros at this we caught the correct flight to Beijing and also the correct one to San Francisco. The flights were pretty much uneventful just long. I think we landed a day or two before we left or something like that. The only strange thing was in San Francisco we had to pick up our bags and carry them a short distance and then re-check them. We found the right gate and had time for a snack and drink before we loaded up and left on schedule. When we landed in Denver it was -8 or so degrees with snow. We found our bags with little trouble, got the shuttle to the parking lot, the truck started and we drove to Littleton.

The next morning I headed for OKC and as I have mentioned numerous times in different write up, not much to say about that trip other than it is not any shorter and I had no problems.

It was a great trip with very little in the way of problems. As mentioned, Nick and Jessica showed us a great time and we appreciate their effort. Considering the things we ate that we had no intestinal problems is nothing short of a miracle. We didn't get very lost, robbed, or much of anything other than have a good time. I did get a head cold probably from the flight back, but it was nothing serious.

Now to get busy on the next trip.