

Pearl River Delta Tour
January 14-17, 1999
by
John Kruithof

During our posting to Hong Kong (HK) 1996-99, one of the several trips Kawsar and I took in China was a four-day guided Pearl River Delta tour. We selected the standard tour from China Travel Service (CTS). It covered a ferry-ride to Macau, road trip to the inland resort city of Zhaoqing and historic Guangzhou (Canton), then by train back to Hong Kong. I will give you a taste of the trip by breaking it down day by day. Looking back at it now, it is a good thing we had the stamina to endure the hectic pace.

Thursday, January 14, 1999. We reported to the Shun Tak Centre's HK-Macau Ferry Terminal well before the required 07:45 time and were met by the CTS representative whose duty it was to ensure we got on the ferry. She informed us that instead of there being a group on this trip, we were the only two persons, which meant traveling in China by car, rather than coach. I assured her we could adjust to that. With formalities so limited, Kawsar and I got on the 08:00 Turbo Cat service to Macau, where we arrived one hour later. A CTS representative, Winifred, met us. She guided us around St. Paul's cathedral and Senado Square. Although we had been to Macau a dozen or so times, Winifred's recounting of this area's history made us look at familiar sights through new eyes. I asked her about the rickety old ferry crossing the Inner Harbour to Wanzai on the Chinese mainland. It did not look like a vessel foreigners would willingly board. Winifred took us to A-Ma Temple, a colourful complex well worth visiting. Just as we were crossing the street towards the temple, a tremendous volley of firecrackers from within shattered the calm, and smoke wafted over the red-coloured structure. Winifred explained in detail the ceremonies being performed by worshippers. Then off to a delightful lunch at the Ritz Hotel, within sight of the fabled Bela Vista Hotel, where so much Portuguese history took place. Then to the border, for a land crossing into China. Thanks to the privileges accorded CTS, it was easier than ever. Instead of having to walk the few hundred metres between Macau's exit formalities and the Chinese check post, the CTS vehicle was at our disposal. After introducing us to our mainland guide, Michael, we bid good-bye to Winifred. We were now in Zhuhai, quite familiar to us because of our (Kawsar's) previous shopping trips there. As was the case in Macau, the benefit of having a local guide was instantly obvious. Michael was able to devote his entire attention to us, as the modern, comfortable car came with a driver. Soon, we were on the boardwalk in front of the statue of the Zhuhai Fishing Girl, whose upraised hands held a pearl. Production of cultured pearls is a big industry in Zhuhai. Kilometres of shallow coastal waters have clearly visible stakes among which the process takes place. Not visible are off-shore oil exploration activities which lend prosperity to the area. Tourism is clearly encouraged. Numerous hotels, resorts, golf clubs and amusement parks dot the coastline. Not very long afterwards, we arrived at Cuiheng Village to visit the former residence and museum of Dr. Sun Yat-sen. We peppered Michael with countless questions about this historic Chinese figure. The nearby Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial School was in session. Large classrooms of 50-60 pupils each were being instructed in Mandarin. That is significant, in a Cantonese-speaking province. We drove into

Zhongshan City as daylight was fading and checked into the Fu Hua Hotel. In the early evening, Michael took us to a restaurant for dinner. CTS policy is to have the guide not sit at the same table as the guests. Therefore Kawsar and I ate in one part of the restaurant, Michael and the driver in another. After dinner, Michael guided us across a bridge to a newly-completed street from which vehicular traffic was banned. Mediterranean style architecture housed modern shops with brand name goods. Another example of how China is catching up, or even surpassing, the West. Or is it? Just a block off the beaten path brought us into alleys uniquely Chinese. Time to go back to the hotel. Modern though it was, the beds were the hardest we had ever slept on. You don't jump into bed: onto is more like it. But after a full day, it really didn't matter. We slept well.

Friday, January 15, 1999. Breakfast at the Fu Hua Hotel, Zhongshan. Cold winds swirled through the rather austere lobby. It was a good thing we were bundled up. Other dining rooms were also open, seemingly a lot cosier, but perhaps western-style breakfasts were not served there. The cold appeared to have affected service as well. Breakfast did arrive eventually. After we got through, we wondered what the view would be like from the top floor revolving restaurant. Nobody was there, but the door was unlocked, so we helped ourselves to a panoramic view of the city, with rivers, hills, temples and pagodas. Then on the road again. We visited a typical village market, not very different from any market in any Chinese city. The amount and variety of foodstuffs was staggering. No matter how overcrowded China may be, starvation is not a worry for most of its citizens. It's quite a distance from Zhongshan to Zhaoqing, so we spent a good part of the day in the car. For much of the distance, multi-lane super highways were privately developed, thus toll gates were frequent. The Pearl River Delta is heavily populated, with no clear delineation between city and village boundaries. There was housing construction all over, as well as roads. It was rather comical going up one stretch of road, along with all the other vehicles, then being turned back a kilometre or two later due to the lanes being completely blocked by paving equipment. So back to the earlier roundabout, and share two-way traffic on the other side of the road. Further on, there were hundreds of acres of potted orange trees of varying sizes, ready for distribution as traditional decoration for the upcoming Chinese New Year. Halfway to our destination was Foshan City. It's a very attractive city, with wide boulevards and a lot of greenery. And an ancestral temple to die for. Kawsar and I have a long-standing interest in ceramics and were very pleased to visit a factory. Lunch was at a posh establishment. Later on, there was a stretch of some kilometres along which hundreds of stalls were selling tangerines neatly piled into pyramids. Had we known what was to happen next, we would have bought a good supply of them. I mentioned to Michael that the scenery I had seen so far made me nostalgic for visiting a Chinese village conforming to a westerner's concept of what a traditional Chinese village should look like. Tradition you want? He instructed the driver to pull off the road. We walked a short distance to a village whose outskirts had been devastated by the laying of the new road. Instant brush with rurality. Narrow concrete paths winding among red-bricked homes and barns. Piglets and chickens outside doorways. Water buffalo tethered to trees. Pigs in pens. Villagers constructing a new, small, red-bricked home. A group of children, fascinated by the appearance of strangers, afraid of coming too closely, scattered in all directions when I produced a

camera. Then a breaking of the ice that can not be scripted. Kawsar spotted a table of four women playing mahjong. A game had just finished. Michael informed the assembled that Kawsar would be honoured if she could join the next game. One woman gladly volunteered her place. Under the scrutiny of a growing number of observers, Kawsar played a knowledgeable hand. She didn't win, but played well enough to impress. Applause when the game ended. Eeeehja! A foreign she-devil, playing mahjong. Nobody minded me taking two unobtrusive pictures during the game, which led to a three-generational family posing for another shot. It was a moment forever etched in our minds. Had we had half a ton of tangerines, we would have left them for the children. We started the remaining distance to Zhaoqing. Hills began crowding in on us. In less than an hour, we were there. After driving on a causeway reminiscent of the West Lake in Hangzhou, we turned into the city and arrived at the Star Lake Hotel. At 31-storey, it is reputedly the tallest building in Western Guangdong. The 23rd-floor room we were assigned had a magnificent view of the lakes and Seven Stars Crag. After an early evening dinner, we watched a colourful display of the Xinghu Coloured Music Fountain. Kawsar couldn't resist visiting some shops. After all that, we were ready to sleep, even though the beds proved every bit as hard as the night before.

Saturday, January 16, 1999. Breakfast at the Star Lake Hotel, Zhaoqing. It was excellent, served in the 3rd floor restaurant. As in Zhongshan a day ago, we were drawn to the idea of getting a bird's-eye view from the revolving restaurant high above. But we were unsuccessful. The door was locked. Although someone was inside, our pantomime through the glass door of only wanting a quick looksee was answered with an equally emphatic tap on the wristwatch and negative wagging of the index finger. Oh well, you can't win them all. It would have been nice to get a glimpse of Xijiang (West River) and possibly the Harbour Passenger Terminal from which we understood Turbo Cat service existed directly to Hong Kong. That was in the opposite direction of Seven Star Crag, where we headed next. It's a natural resort area, no doubt crowded on holidays. It was peaceful on our visit. Limestone crags rose for considerable height from the waters of the lake. Crag, islands, pathways, pavilions, foliage blended in perfect harmony. Tightrope artists traversing between two crags were brightly contrasted against the clear blue sky. At one of the pavilions we bought a rice paper painting of blossoms and crags. We were impressed by the painter, who had met Deng Xiaoping during the latter's swing through the south. He showed us the advanced sketch of a large painting he had been commissioned to do in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the revolution. Seven Star Crag was truly an inspiring sight, which no doubt motivated this verse composed by Marshal Ye Jianying in 1966:

*With water borrowed from the West Lake,
Seven hills transferred from Yangshuo,
Green willows lining the banks
This picturesque scenery will remain forever!*

We spent hours walking that glorious day, but it was time to move on to Guangzhou. By late afternoon we checked into the White Swan Hotel. Room 1911. Nice touch, corresponding with the year Dr. Sun Yat-sen overthrew China's last emperor. In the

fading light, we walked around Shamian Island. Across the canal, the front of Qingping Market was enveloped in a kilometre-long shroud of bamboo poles and plastic covering. Workmen were systematically demolishing a whole traditional neighbourhood. Progress, you know. For dinner, Kawsar had requested Michael to arrange for a hotpot meal. It was more elaborate than expected, and we found ourselves not quite able to manage. No problem. Two delightful hostesses helped us throughout the meal, mixing the meats, vegetables, dumplings, noodles, herbs and spices, lobbed into and retrieved from boiling broth. It took us some time to get back to the hotel, its lobby filled with interesting shopping opportunities, to which Kawsar availed herself. In no time at all, the fourth day of our trip arrived.

Sunday, January 17, 1999. Buffet breakfast at the White Swan Hotel, Guangzhou. Spectacular setting. Scattered among the considerable number of guests were at least a half-dozen white couples with adopted Chinese babies. The hotel is an almost obligatory stop in finalizing adoption procedures. It was very touching to observe the bonding process the now enlarged families were going through. Although we had been to Guangzhou before on business and pleasure, we did the touristy things. The Six Banyan Pagoda, the Five Rams Statue... and on down the line. The Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, with its 3000-plus capacity unobstructed by pillars, is a strikingly impressive structure. After lunch, we went to a downtown market. Kawsar bought some authentic, soiled, worn, embroidered little shoes and dodats. I latched onto a first-edition, well-thumbed, mildewed English-language copy of Quotations from Chairman Mao. Then time to head out for the East Railway Station. Given Guangzhou's chaotic traffic, it's difficult to know in advance how long it will take. As luck would have it, we arrived at the station well ahead of time. Why not kill some time at the nearby stadium, where a flea-market was going on? Kawsar bought two small vases that the hawker insisted had very reluctantly been given up by his poor relatives in Chongqing because of severest economic pressure. A likely story, but the vases were nice. Then it was time to say good-bye to Michael and the driver, and board the 17:25 Kowloon Through Train for the comfortable two-hour journey home. On the train, an event happened that showed you need luck to survive. During the few minutes I vacated my seat to freshen up, our now quite heavy handbag decided to drop down from the overhead rack, directly onto where I had been seated. Kawsar's scream scared the living daylight out of everyone in the coach, except me, blissfully unaware of what had happened until I returned to my seat. The rest of the trip, through Shenzhen, much used by Hong Kong residents for rest, recreation and relief from high HK prices, was uneventful. Then to our abode, in Wisdom Court, Mid-Levels, and a comfortable bed.

John Kruithof
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