

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

I continue with my adventures, excitements and disappointments on my trip to Xi'an:

Day Three

I had never seen a real stupa before, except in photographs, of course, so I was very interested to see the real thing, close up, I mean. We went with Lilly Wang, our guide, for a trip to The Temple of Flourishing Teaching. It is, we learned, one of the ancestral courtyards of the Ci'en Sect, one of the 8 Buddhist sects of the Han Chinese. The story behind this stupa was that Buddhist monk Xuan Zeng went to India in order to learn about Buddha and he returned with more than 1,000 books, all translated by him from Sanskrit into Chinese. The stupa is said to be the repose of those 1,000 books although I was disappointed that I was not allowed to look at them. Monk Xuan Zeng is said to have stayed in India for more than 16 years and his food and lodging were paid for by Emperor Tai Zong of the Tang Dynasty. One cannot help but be impressed by the many buildings that comprise the surroundings of The Temple of Flourishing Teaching, the centre of which stands the 7-storey stupa. But, My Dear Grandchild, make no mistake, Buddhist monks are not at all passive when it comes to looking after their own benefits, I can assure you. One little Chinese child of about 3 year, for instance, who was visiting the stupa with her parents, was trying to climb atop a horizontal phoenix at the entrance to the stupa and, when spotted by a passing monk, a roar went up – and the child, scared out of its little wits, went crying to its parents. You have heard, I am sure, about 'Fat Monks and Skinny Scholars (,)' well, at The Temple of Flourishing Teaching, there are many such fat monks. In fact, these monks are living proof of the veracity of the statement. There is even a sign that states that, should anybody wish to take a photograph of a fat monk, there is a cost of 10 renminbi per photograph. And these monks are not even movies stars! At least, no yet. However, there are those fighting Buddhist monks in Lhasa, Tibet, aren't there?

As with most places that I visited in Xian, there were tourists from all parts of China, visiting the same sites. Most of these tourists enjoyed the pleasure of spitting all over the place. It is nasty, filthy habit, but it appears to be a required pastime of these people. When entering the buildings of The Temple of Flourishing Teaching, one has to be careful not tread on the door steps, one is told, but, gingerly, hop over them. While standing, looking inside one building, I was pushed aside by some burly Chinese man, wanting to take a photograph of the building. There was no polite motion or request, just a 'Get out of the way!' I did not know that they had yakuzu in China, too. The entire Temple of Flourishing Teaching was surrounded by manicured gardens of exquisite beauty and I could not help but ponder who did all of the work on the gardens ... until I noted some Chinese labourers. No wonder the monks are all fat!

Driving to The Temple of Flourishing Teaching was, in itself, quite an experience, I can tell you. Our van moved within a few inches of other vehicles and I was really quite afraid at times. At road junctions, where there were traffic lights, there were, also, smartly dressed policemen, directing traffic. But not directing the many thousands of pedestrians, however. It appears to me that the pedestrians play some sort of game which could well be named: 'Hit me if you can!' When the light turns green and motor vehicles start to move, the red light, which is supposed to stop anybody, using the pedestrian crossing, is fair game for any person with a little spunk as they dart across the road, missing the oncoming motor vehicles by a foot or so. I noted, within a period of about one hour, not less than 3 road accidents, involving a variety of motor vehicles. I saw nobody hit by a motor car, but there was that accident between 2 bicycles, with one cyclist, lying on the

road with blood, gushing from a wound.

Day Four

Good Sunday ended with a visit to Muslim Street. There is a police station at the entrance of Muslim Street. I don't need to say more than that, do I. Lilly said that we should try the mutton soup and so that is exactly what we ordered. Now I understand the reason that Muslims often get fat. The soup was interesting, but if I never have it, again, I shall not fret. I did have a bit of a concern, during this evening – because, after 'eating' the mutton soup, I needed to visit the toilet. But there are none in this street and the 'restaurants' do not have water closets, too. I was fit to burst and so I asked Lilly to request the use of the toilet at the police station. Lilly was, at first, afraid to make the request of a police officer, standing menacingly at the entrance of the Chinese copshop. I nudged her to make the request as a matter of a medical emergency. The policeman turned out to be charming and offered the facilities of the copshop to me, but warned that there were no lights in the building. It was just as well because, had there been lights, I might have preferred to burst my bladder than piddle in this outhouse that was in-house.

Having relieved myself, it was back to the Golden Flower Hotel for a glass of Champagne – and some real food. Now, about this hotel, I must warn you, My Dear Grandchild, that, just because it is stated to be a Shangri-La hotel property, it is not a 5-star hotel by Western standards. The food is nothing to write home and the accommodations are only just passable. When we arrived on Good Friday (March 21), something was wrong with the hotel's computer and about 200 people were standing in line, waiting for a room. When, eventually, we booked in, it was discovered that, in fact, our names did not correspond with the assigned room number. Throughout the trip, therefore, whenever we signed for something, there was, always, a question as to whether or not we were, in fact, Betty and Bo-Bo. It was irritating, to say the least. Also, in the evenings, it got a little chilly, but the foyer door was left ajar so that icy gusts of wind blew through the long corridor, leading the bar area, which doubles as a lounge for guests to have a drink and a chat. When this matter was reported to the Duty Manager, he suggested that we move to a table, nearer the window, where one could be closeted away from the fresh breezes, blowing through the half-opened front door. I could relate other stories about this hotel, but I think you have the gist of it: Do not use this hotel if you intend to visit this very interesting part of the Motherland.

Talk to you, next week when I shall finish up with my trip to Xian.

Chief Lady

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