

CHINA – A DIFFICULT PLACE TO TRAVEL?

Before heading to China, I wrestled with the idea of solo travel vs. group tours. I'd heard from many people that it was a very difficult place to travel, especially with the language barrier while trying to traverse a huge country. Some had simply given up after a few weeks due to limited patience levels and an inability to cope with the extreme differences in culture; others stuck to the main cities of Beijing, Xian, Chengdu and Shanghai; and the vast majority of others chose tours in order to bypass the difficulty.

In the end, I did a mixture of both. With around 10 weeks to spend in China, I wanted to see and experience as much as possible. Solo travel allowed me to face some of the toughest travel challenges that have ever been thrown at me, where I overcame the biggest of frustrations such as getting lost (many times), being misinformed (the Chinese nature to be very helpful and save face isn't always beneficial), and learning how to be the best mime artist that ever lived (alongside the limited vocab you swiftly learn this is your only form of communication). I became a more confident traveller; I got to know places that I didn't just want to pass through quickly; I experienced all forms of local transportation (I love metros, trains and buses); and I revelled in the chaos of being thrown into the deep end without guidance, time scales and restriction.

Yet, group travel allowed me to see places that would have been extremely difficult to get to solo, or which were not offered as day trips or short excursions from my hostel. Sure, there would have been a way, but not without losing a few days of travel time (and sanity) in the process, as well as not being in the vicinity of other travellers to hang out with. China is also not a huge solo traveller destination like its South East Asia neighbours, with singletons like me being a rarity amongst couples, friendship groups, foreign students and English teachers – most of who are not doing a similar route or going in the same direction.

We are all different, and whether you want to face China and its limitations head on or take the hassle-free route, it doesn't matter. A land of frustration and fascination, China has a lot to offer whether you love big cities or tucked away villages, mountain hikes or temple hopping, history or modernisation. Combining both forms of travel allowed me to mix and match the scenery and the types of activities available, rather than do a straight big city hop.

I never tired of Beijing, spending 12 days there continuously exploring, and loved the bustling city vibe combined with the pockets of history and local life. I continued on a route solo through to Nanjing, whose well-known Massacre museum ensures the city's devastating history is never forgotten. From there it's a three hour train ride to Shanghai, where you can seek some comfort from the modernity and westernised way of life, taking in the magnificent skyline of Pudong, shopping centres on every street corner and the busy bars and nightlife. Shanghai is also a fantastic base in order to visit the traditional towns of Suzhou and Hangzhou, which are only a few hours away by train.

Shanghai connects you to many places including Xian, Chengdu and Huangshan but I chose to train back to Beijing in order to begin an overland tour route that would take me through well-established and off the beaten track destinations in Central, West and South of China. While Datong and the out of town Buddhist caves, the ancient walled city of Pingyao, the Terracotta Warrior famed Xian and the panda residence of Chengdu are well trodden and easy to get to, my overland tour allowed me not only to see more of local life as we passed through it, but meant I got to see places that were difficult to get to or which were not on my original radar – such as the beautiful mountain and UNESCO temple complex town of Wutai Shan, the cave dwelling village of Lijiashan, and Yan'an, which became the center of the Communist Revolution from 1936 to 1948.

The Yangtze River Cruise is a great way to travel on Asia's largest river and between the two travel hubs of Chongqing and Yichang, or vice versa. Ending in Chongqing meant that I was in closer proximity to travel to the giant Buddha in Leshan, the spectacular Emei Shan mountain and its spectacular trek and down to the beautiful Yunnan province, where Tiger Leaping Gorge awaits you outside of the beautiful narrow streets and cobbled stoned alleyways of Lijiang. Lijiang, Dali and Kunming form the golden triangle of Yunnan, but sadly I ran out of visa time after Kunming.

China is so large that it's impossible to see it all in one trip. Like me, you may love it as much as you hate it... but love it just that little bit more. Everyday something new surprised me and everyday something else drove me crazy. 10 weeks allowed me time to acclimatise to the way of life, spend significant time in my favourite places (I'm a huge fan of Beijing) and give me ample time to try and understand the Chinese way of life. But it was also time to leave – I needed to move on from China in order to appreciate it and recharge my batteries since travelling between places is long and the frustration, while you get used to it, certainly takes its toll.

I'll be back, mainly to concentrate on the Southern regions, where glorious sunshine beats down on paddy fields and picturesque villages set within a wall of magnificent mountain ranges and where traditional towns suck you in to their winding streets and everyday burst of activity. I'm also dreaming of the Silk Road route in the far West and Tibet when it re-opens to tourists. I guess I will never tire of China, but at the rate its changing and being modernised I best get back here soon.