

Asian journey, before China was transformed

Diary of a journey in 1984 by train across China and Russia

In the summer of 1984 I bought a one-way plane ticket to Hong Kong, with the intention of travelling into and across China before returning home on the trains through Russia.

This slightly bizarre move had been driven by frustration, because attempts to set up a visit to some of China's caves had been getting nowhere with letters written from home. So I decided to go out there and establish some real contacts. It was the dream of many cavers to visit the huge karst lands of southern China, so well-known for the great limestone towers around Guilin that were famous in many Chinese paintings. That spectacular landscape had been visited by a few Western geographers prior to 1950, though none had recorded the caves, and formal exchanges saw Australian and British geographers making brief visits to Guilin in 1977. Song Linhua, a karst geomorphologist at Academia Sinica in Beijing, then came to England in 1980, when I showed him around the Yorkshire Dales.

I had visited Guilin for a few days in 1982, with a tour group out of Hong Kong, and visas for independent travel in China first became available later in the same year. The opportunity was there to be taken. I was fortunate in having a few contacts in key places, all of whom were so very helpful as I travelled through. Most important was Song, in Beijing, and he also provided an introduction to Yang Mingde, a karst professor in Guiyang. I had also briefly met Yuan Daoxian, who was head of the Karst Institute in Guilin. Oil geologists at BP who I knew in England had moved to Guangzhou before I passed through, and Jose and Shirley de Barros were good friends in Nottingham before they moved to Hong Kong.

There were no guide books to China in those days, though Graham Earnshaw's newly published *On Your Own in China* provided bits of useful info at some places. Language was something of a barrier too. With very few Westerners then in China, it was sometimes a lonely journey, but I kept a detailed diary. These pages are taken from it, with minimal editing except that many of the notes on caves and geology have been omitted.

The month-long jaunt provided unrepeatable glimpses of China in those early days. I did return in 1985, with the first Western caving expedition to China, with myself leading a phase in Guizhou, before joining Andy Eavis for his phase in Guangxi (fixed with Yuan in UK while I was on my way home through Russia), and that was the start of the China Caves Project, which has developed over the years. I also returned to western China in 1988 with son Sam, to central China in 1991 with wife Jan, and to various places since, either with Jan or with groups of cavers. Within that time, China has changed beyond all recognition, so this diary might already count as something of a historical document.



Monday August 13, London

An early train from Nottingham to London with time for embassy visits. Obtained visa for East Germany, but Poland refused to issue one without having a Russian visa. The ever-unhelpful Intourist then said that their visa (already applied for) would not be ready for another two weeks; so phone calls to arrange Jan sending it by Datapost to a contact in Beijing's BP office. Stay overnight with brother-in-law Rob.

Tuesday August 14, flight

Out to Gatwick for 1100 flight to Hong Kong. Long boring flight over cloud, with night-time break in Bahrain.

Wednesday August 15, Hong Kong

Landed at Kai Tak at 0920, no checked bag to collect, taxi to Star Ferry, and make it to Swire House for 1005, where Lucille says China visa should be no problem (even though almost unobtainable in England). Minibus to Jose and Shirley's impressive flat (staying there while they are away), then sightseeing around Central, Repulse Bay and Aberdeen, before late visit to Peak.

Thursday August 16, Hong Kong

Back to Swire's in Central, and Lucille has China visa and a train ticket. Guiyang is now an open city, along with 63 others that foreigners can visit. Round Happy Valley and Po Shan Road landslide site, then Peak again.

Friday August 17, train to Guangzhou

Up at 6, locked up flat, then bus and Star Ferry to railway station for 7.30. Simple through Customs, then onto very smart train. Spacious coaches, booked window seat, air-con, rotating seats to face front. Through sprawling Sha Tin in New Territories, beside new road being built to border. Through Lo Wu without stopping, passing vast crowds crossing into China the slow way. Then open country with no sign yet of Shenzhen megacity, just rice, pines and eucalyptus on red soils. At Guangzhou station, lucky that my coach stops by passport check, so no queues, and meet Heidi at exit, and taxi to China Hotel. Jon and Heidi live in a suite, and BP office is in same building; I have a luxury apartment to myself.

Out for a walk in Yuexiu Park, entry 10 fen = 1p; all paper money, no coins (Y = yuan, with about 10Y = £1, and 1Y = 100 fen). Park has museum, roller-coaster and Sun Yat Sen Concert Hall. Buy FEC currency at bank in hotel. Foreign Exchange Certificates are equal to local currency but inflated on black market, needed in Friendship Stores to buy foreign items, e.g. Coke in hotel shop. Dinner at Baitiane Hotel with BP crowd; good meal, nuts, chicken, pork, bamboo, brains of something, burnt seaweed soup. Taxi back to hotel at 10pm through city beginning to sleep.

Saturday August 18, Guangzhou

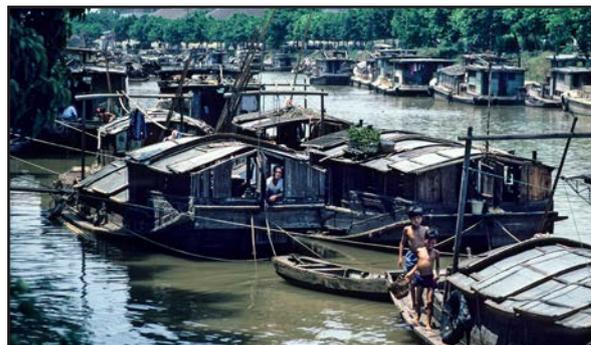
Downtown with Heidi to Qingping Food Market. Amazing, with live turtles, tortoises, terrapins, frogs, snakes, fish, starfishes, ducks, hens, birds, cats, dogs, monkeys, civets, crabs etc, but no pangolins nor eagles as in Guilin previous year. Spice market alien and unrecognisable, bird market with live crickets for food, and goldfish galore. Meat market horrific, with selection, execution and storage; nothing wrapped, just bits of string round heads, feet, limbs or guts. Then to Shamian Island with houses of opium splendour, but little river traffic. Buses packed at 8am in jammed traffic, but quiet by midday.

Afternoon with Jon to Baiyun Shan to walk up hill though Sea of Pines. Huge black-and-yellow spiders on giant webs between trees. Views over plains from pagoda-style lookout; rice paddies, villages, new towns, hi-rise blocks, roads full of buses, and suburbs of Guangzhou. Evening at BP curry party, and meet Angela Barra who may be in Kunming same time as me.

Sunday August 19, Foshan

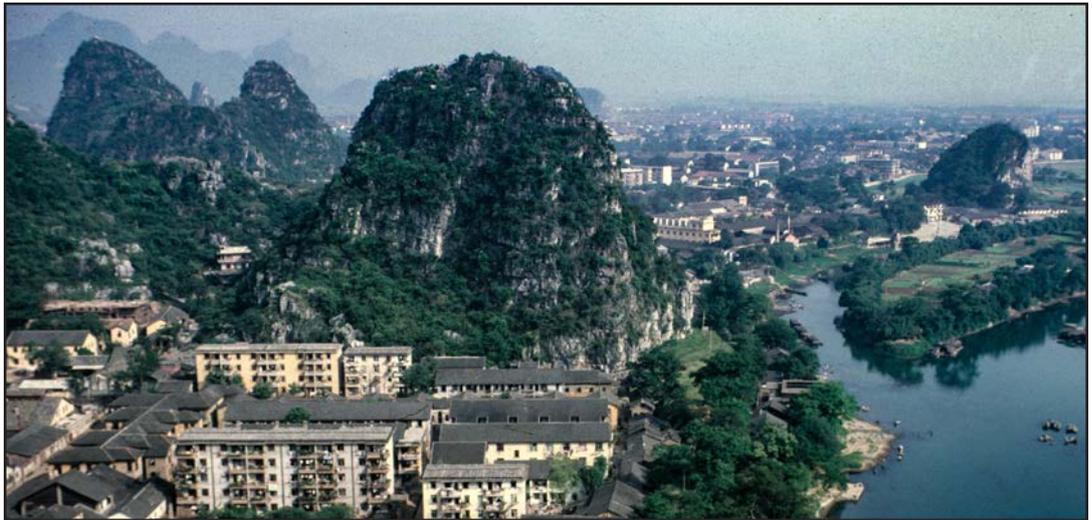
Train to Guilin had been planned, but difficult to get tickets with overnight change at Hengyang, and bus was two days of rough going, so Jon persuaded me to fly; frequent flights, only 62Y (£6) almost same as train fare; easily booked at Dongfang Hotel. So a spare day before leaving.

Taxi to Foshan on busy road via guarded bridge over Pearl River. Affluent town with new hotels and busy streets. Very ornate Taoist temple, with great collection of barbarous ancient weapons. Lunch in a park, then walk



Live-aboard freight barges at Foshan.

Limestone towers by the Li River, in the urban sprawl of Guilin city.



to river which is lined with family-run barges. Visited pottery with girls working on extremely delicate clay figures and also handling heavy boxes of glazed tiles. Back to town through a heavy rain storm.

Monday August 20, flight to Guilin

Up before 7 to see tai chi exercises to music in park. Walk through rush-hour of a million bicycles (all registered), to building site with superb steam-driven pile-driver; also team of men demolishing thick concrete wall just with sledge-hammers with flexible handles. Borrowed Jon's bike for ride-about, excellent in a maze of streets. Called at Liurong (Six Banyan Trees) Temple, with three gold-painted wooden Buddhas, many monks, offerings and joss sticks but no banyan trees. Also excellent 6-level tower for great views at top of increasingly narrow stair wells.

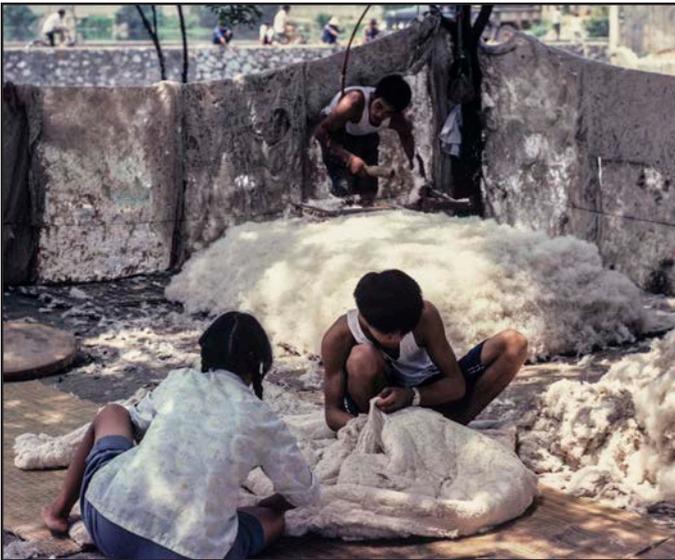
Taxi to airport and easy domestic check-in. Flight 45 minutes in cloud with just a few glimpses of incredible tower karst near Yangshuo, and then beside runway at Guilin airport. In-flight service was a fan, ice cream and box of dried lychees. Free bus into town centre that was packed with traffic of buses and bicycles. Walk to Ronghu Hotel beside lake, and get room for 25Y without air con, but it has mosquito nets, fan, shower, desk and chair. Brilliant sunny day and 90°F but the limestone towers dissolve into haze. At hotel travel desk order train ticket for Wednesday night to Kunming, but only hard seat available at 47Y, unlikely to be reserved and this train, #79 from Shanghai, is famous for being grossly over-crowded.

Walkabout in town for photos of boats on the river, and of many men paying cards, chess and scissors-paper-stone, all for money or cigarettes. No problems taking photos, just needs a smile. Walk to Fubo Hill, entry fee 5f, through foot-cave maze with many carvings, and to top for great views. Continue to railway station to check timetables for Kunming, and meet Jane (a man speaking passable English) who offers hard sleeper ticket for 42Y on Tuesday night, but none on Wednesday. Walk to his cafe on main street and he produces a ticket. Looks OK and probably the best bet. Seems he and a friend have cornered the market in Kunming berths (only available when folk leave the train at Guilin) and is profit margin is in the black-market conversion from FEC to RMB (renminbi, peoples' money). He warns of pickpockets at the ticket office for Luti Cave; first sign of crime in China with beginnings of tourism. There are noticeably more Westerners, more tours, more touts than in 1982.

Back to hotel and cancel their train ticket. Problem in that I did not bring Yuan Daoxian's phone number at the Karst Institute. All attempts at finding it fail; five assistants and a dictionary, but no-one has



Hand-carts and bicycles only in a street in Guilin.



Making kapok quilts on a street in Guilin.

scrambled egg, various vegetables, Chinese beer (good) and Chinese champagne (bad). Flat had 4 rooms each less than 3 metres square, including reading room in the kitchen, fans, no central heating (not allowed south of the Yangtze) and Chinese colour TV with two provincial channels and the national channel with universally popular English lessons every afternoon.

Afternoon out with Hu Mengyu, Yuan's assistant. Nice guy, spoke good English; had studied karst hydrology until the Cultural Revolution, when he was sent to Inner Mongolia digging wells for two years; he really does not like the communists. We took in all the classic karst sights of Guilin; Qixing Cave, Camel Hill, Memorial Cave inscribed tablets, Zenpi Cave palaeontological excavations and White Snake Cave, but not the well-known, decorated Luti Dong (Reed Flute Cave) which I had been to in 1982.

Back for dinner at Yuan's, with an excess of food and long chats about China karst, Guanyan caves, subsidence sinkholes and Java's Gunung Sewu karst. Then down to station and into first-class waiting room with comfortable sofas away from the hordes; a bit of Yuan influence for foreign guest, though he was horrified that I had bought my ticket on the black market. Train arrives only a little late. Hard class berth has three levels, and I am on top (the other five are Swedish and Australian), all open to the corridor, but OK as seatless passengers are crammed into the hard-seat coaches and the door to the sleepers is kept locked and guarded by fierce conductors, one to each coach.

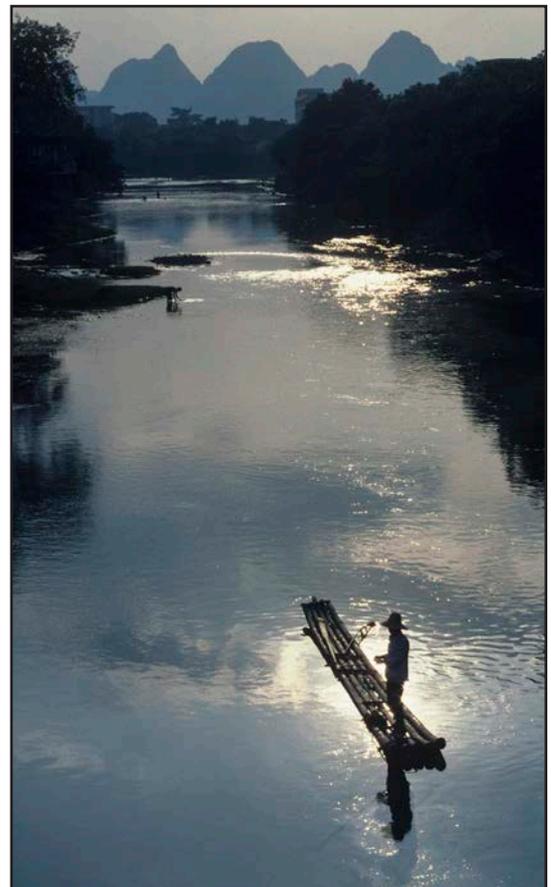
Thin soft mat and a raffia cover are good to lie on, and thin blanket provided. Smooth ride and a good night's sleep. Lights out soon after leaving Guilin, and fan off, but open window is good for ventilation. Corridor is swept seemingly every 10 minutes, with all the rubbish thrown out of any window. Washroom and loo at end of each coach. Endless hot water available from coal-fired boilers. No cold drinks except over-sweet orange (Guilin Cola, sampled in Guilin when with Hu, was worst ever), so fill bottle with boiling water and drink two hours later when cool.

Horror stories from travellers of hard-seat coaches packed with people standing shoulder-to-shoulder all night with others climbing over, but Westerners often manage to upgrade to soft berth after paying inflated prices to train conductors. Best avoided in middle-of-night scrums.

heard of the Institute. Try again tomorrow. Hotel restaurant for an excellent meal of beef, rice and zu porridge, with pot of tea and a coke; only 5Y even in hotel, and enough food for a whole day.

Tuesday August 21, Guilin

Up at 6, beautiful morning. Walkabout in NW part of town for views and photos of towers; the whole town is active before 7. Walk to China Travel Service office, and find Institute number, 2442, but they do not know where it is. Phone Yuan from hotel, check out, and he comes for me in a car after 30 minutes. Back to Institute for tea and tour. It's a big place; laboratories, offices, research rooms, staff of 270, cave survey teams (but no cave surveys), museum and displays. Good lunch with Yuan and his wife in their flat at the Institute: rice, ham crudo, salted duck eggs,



A calm evening for fishing on the Li River.

Wednesday August 22, train westbound

Alarm for dawn at 6, and then spend 13 hours gazing out of window at endless fantastic karst. Most of time train is slow with tight curves and steep gradients. Pass many small towns, stop at some for food and washrooms. Endless cultivation; all flat land in rice terraces, corn, tobacco fast-growing Australian kauri trees, but few animals or birds.

Early stages after Liuzhou through gorges with many huge cave entrances, then onto Guizhou Plateau with 100-metre-tall cones scattered across alluvial flats, and again cave entrances everywhere. A totally amazing day, until dusk near Shuicheng, which has spectacular cones behind, before climb into mountains with deep valleys and scattered limestone.

Thursday August 23, Kunming

Woken at 5 by noisy conductor, and into Kunming at 6, dead on time. Queues out through ticket barrier with vast number of people beaten into two lines by hysterical women with megaphones in long subway; one punches a local who gets out of line. Into huge square. Told at ticket office cannot buy ticket for 26th until 24th, but probably a brush-off. Tuk-tuk charges 3Y to hotel, so fight way onto #2 bus, crammed tight for 5f, and at second attempt find Kunming Hotel, which is the only one allowed to take foreigners. Huge modern block; check in to double room for myself. Then to ticket desk to order hard seat for 26Y to Guiyang on 26th (no berths for that journey); promised it will be a reserved seat, but I have doubts. Also buy 10Y ticket for tour to Shilin tomorrow, and meet up with Angela from Guangzhou.

Walkabout in town. Many people in Mao jackets, but also many minority folk in colourful and spectacular outfits. Bright blue Yunnan clothing is common. Various old women hobbling around with bound feet (a sign of wealth in the past, as they did not walk but were carried, banned by Mao since 1949). Fine market and tea shop with old men. Old part of town has wood-fronted houses in Himalayan style. Pass old closed temple and chaotic building site, then into Cuihu Park with lakes, carps, ancient wooden boats, pavilions, zigzag walks, trees and hordes of Chinese taking photos of each other. Head west along road with mix of old houses and new blocks of flats looking quite good.

At West bus station take #7 bus out into country. Endless roadside stalls, corn, peas, rice, tobacco, then paddy fields to Heilinpu village where bus dies. It never had exceeded 20mph, free-wheeled all the hills, only the horn seemed to work. No other bus to Qiongzhu Temple, so bought apples, and took two buses back to hotel. Good dinner of smoked ham, pea pods and pork.

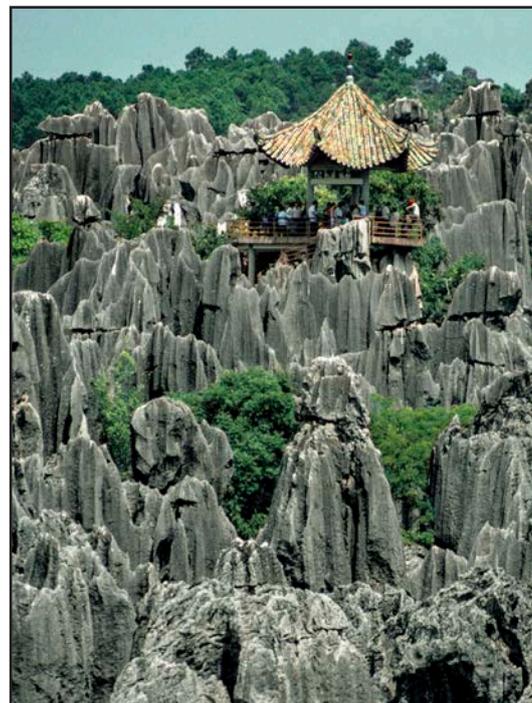
Friday August 24, Shilin Stone Forest

Up at 6, breakfast of zu porridge with bits of meat (probably buffalo) and out for bus at 7.20. Toyota minibus for 3 hours and 127 km to Shilin. Heavy traffic, and out on main road clear of town an endless stream of lorries, buses, mini-tractor-carts and hand-pulled wagons across Kunming Plain of rice paddies. Road mostly 10m wide, tarred and in good condition, crossing many narrow-gauge railways. Over hills of red mudstone, through broad valley with Yangzong Lake, coal mining and a dirty power station, to a brief stop in village of sheep, pigs and tobacco. Many horses on road pulling carts, and fewer hand carts than Guilin. Into Shilin and book a room in guest house.

Stone Forest is amazing. Pinnacles 20-30m tall, and a maze of concrete footpaths through fissures, up and over pinnacles, through caves and windows and beneath fallen blocks. Hordes



Pedestrians in downtown Kunming.



Limestone pinnacles that form the Stone Forest of Shilin, with visitors in the viewing pagoda.



Main street through the village of Shilin.



Skinning the goat lakeside in Shilin village.

of Chinese, chaos at photo spots, and crowds around Sword Peak Lake. Take photos from Pavilion viewpoint atop a pinnacle, then wander to northeastern area with fewer crowds, impossible to follow paths on map. Out to perimeter road for complete walk round and to area of isolated remnant pinnacles. Photos of local people, buffaloes, goats. Four hours out and excellent, Shilin really is an excellent pinnacle karst. Electric storm and torrential rain for an hour, but could see it coming, so took a break in the hotel with time to write up geological notes.

Then out again to walk to Shilin village on edge of large lake. Houses of mud-and-straw bricks. with straw or tiled roofs on bamboo or timber frames. Meet up with Martin and Angela who were buying clothes, so all invited into house for tea. Sit on low straw stools, bare mud floor, loose straw mats, coal stove in corner, pictures on walls, open door, tiny high windows. Open to attic storage, interior wall to sleeping room. One electric light bulb.

Village 'road' is rough track of bedrock and mud. Houses surrounded by trees, goats, pigs, ducks, chickens, friendly people. Memorable scene beside lake where freshly killed goat has its skin separated from the meat by sticking a tube into an ankle and inflating the entire skin with air injected from a bicycle pump.

Back to hotel for dinner. Excellent fixed menu of rice, Yunnan ham, duck, peas, swedes, pork, potatoes etc, all for 4Y. Out for photos of sunset over lake, and avoid hotel dancing display, though dancers are very colourfully dressed and the music is good. Altogether a great hotel, touristy but not overdone, and quiet.

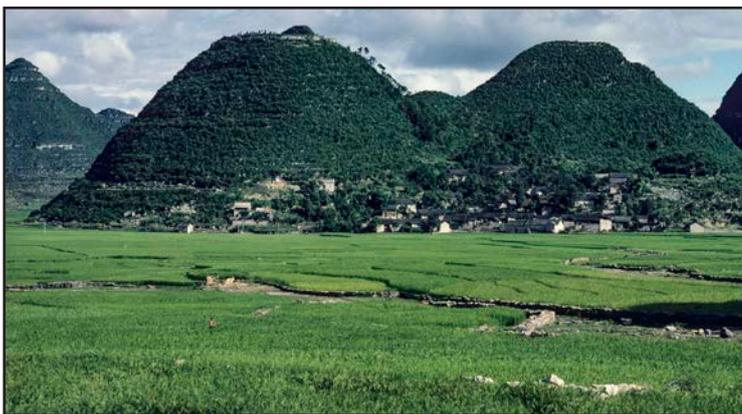
Saturday August 25, back to Kunming

Up at 6.30 for sunrise, but not good, so walk through Stone Forest, beautiful, silent all alone except for active giant spiders. Out past Lotus Pond and Minor Stone Forest with excellent isolated pinnacles. Breakfast of zu at 7.20 and minibus leaves at 8.30 for morning drive back to Kunming. Chinese drivers are the worst in the world; absolutely no road sense, and drive on their horns, Saw four crashes, including head-on on a blind bend (because they have been told only to overtake when they cannot see another car coming!). But scenery is lovely. Harvesting rice with scythes, then using pedal-powered threshers out in the fields. And lime kilns in operation, just as was in the Dales.

Book into the hotel again after moderate hassle over no rooms. "Mei you" is the ubiquitous call sign of China's service desks; it means "have none". Afternoon walkabout, passing three medicine men with weird collections of skull and paws etc of bears, deer, monkey and the rest. Then vegetable fields being enriched with human waste; distinctive aroma; the night-soil gatherers walk the streets in the early mornings. Buy apples and bread for the train. At bread shop, have to wait, alongside small crowd, for 15 minutes while shop-girl sits silent, motionless and staring at us, in front of a pile of bread; until the end of her lunch break, when she then serves bread without moving from her seat. Back to hotel, and find train ticket is there, before another good dinner.

Sunday August 26, train to Guiyang

Up at 6.40 and walk to station as buses are ludicrously full. Find reserved seat; next to corridor, so swap for good seat by north window. At first, few people are standing, but after more station calls, it is worse. By the time we are into the karst it is packed, and grotesque; I cannot reach the opposite window because there are 21 people between it and me. A stand-up fight ensues with a 40-year-old woman screaming hysterically, punching and biting a man; no idea why. Really, the trains are a disgrace to humanity.



Conical hills of limestone among the rice paddies in the Anshun karst.

But the window scenery is superb. Mix of karst and coal mining until Mei Hua Shan when we are into continuous spectacular karst with tall steep conical hills. Through Shuicheng Basin surrounded by high cone karst, with many sinkholes and cave entrances. Into darkness before Anshun, and train is even more crowded.

Fight to escape at Guiyang, out of station, then a young teacher (Zhang Dian) rushes up to me; he has recognised my photo from my *Caves* book, but I am the only Westerner in the city. We wait amid seething hordes of people, then Yang Mingde arrives, with Zhang Xinghuai, Prof. of English, so conversation gets easier.

Drive out to Jinqiao Hotel, miles across drab city. No English spoken at hotel, but room OK in best wing, but this place has not heard of tourists. Reception committee of five, including head of university. They plan next day in the karst, day after for me to lecture on Java, and assure me that they will have train ticket to Chongqing for Tuesday night. They ask about Kevin Senior, who Marjorie Sweeting has put onto them in selfish attempt to keep China karst in her Oxford group; I put them right with words about Tim Atkinson and Andy Eavis. They depart at 11, leaving me with a breakfast of cake and a tin of milk; the hotel is dead on its feet, and Guiyang is seriously basic.

Monday August 27, Anshun and Huangguoshu

Up at 6.30 for mini-breakfast, and Zhang, son and Yang arrive in car (with driver) at 8, and we head west for 120 km to Anshun karst. Road condition is horrific, though driver is OK and traffic lessens away from city. Many trucks, one crash, many roadside repairs (a complete gearbox overhaul at one point). One huge jam because two trucks parked opposite each other, with drivers sitting in them oblivious to chaos. Buses and trucks queued up just switch off engines and wait: ludicrous. Pass one tea plantation.

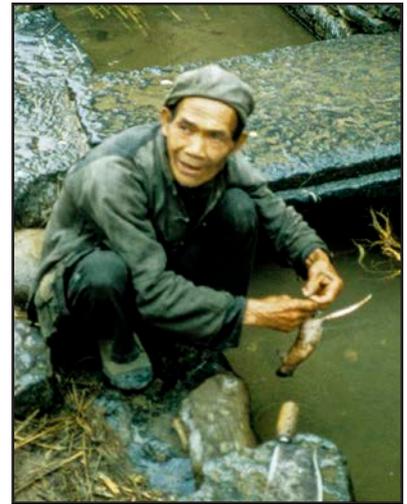
Guiyang is a huge, very dirty city; poor, old stone and wood houses, few windows, falling down, polluting factories, hand-pulled carts laden with steel or concrete on bad gradients, dirt everywhere. Some newer blocks of flats, road out of town is very bad. Nearly a million people. Summer rains and winter is down to -9°C in centre of huge Guizhou Province, which is almost all karst.

Anshun is in basin surrounded by beautiful fengcong karst with cones 200-300m tall, deep dolines and many river sinks. Huangguoshu is largest waterfall in China, very impressive and a major tourist site. Large river drops 70m over tufa screen, with caves behind, and more tufa cascades upstream and downstream. Nearby Xianu Dong has fine perched phreatic passages decorated with large stalagmites.



Wooden shop-houses in the old part of Anshun.

Drive back partly in night; chaos with no lights on many vehicles, people all over the roads, no road sense from driver; often stop when truck comes in opposite direction as no-one uses dipped lights. Back to Yang's flat on university site; again four small rooms, TV, and shelves full of journals.



Dinner tonight will be tasty rat with a delicious drain marinade.

Village life in the Anshun karst.

Dinner is amazing with ten of us round small table; some food Sichuan hot, whole chicken looking up from bowl of soup, odd fish, bones spoil the fish and chicken, good pork and beef. Rice spirit (Maotai) and beer to drink, but no cold water much needed after long day out. Eating habits are disgusting; noisy smacking chops, mouth open to eat, spit on floor, throw food on floor, sniff and cough and belch loudly, eat too much, and vast amounts of leftovers (though maybe because of honoured guest). Back to hotel at 10.30 and peace at last, with last can of coke bought with FEC at Friendship Store in Kunming.

Tuesday August 28, Guiyang

Zhang comes for me in a car at 8. Back to university on north side of town, and to spartan dining room for breakfast of egg-and-tomato soup. Then to main building for lecture to crowd from university geography and geology departments, local engineering college, and provincial geological survey; foreign visitors are real rarities in Guiyang. Bare room with blackboards, good chalk, pale blue blackout, and automatic projector with 50-magazine that jams twice and had very difficult focus control. No electricity at first, but soon remedied.

Lecture on Java karst takes an hour, with Zhang translating; everyone taking notes, four fans and three tape recorders going. Tea is brought round five minutes before the end. Then ten minute break while everyone writes questions on bits of paper, many very theoretical, some good practical. They show lack of understanding of caves, and no comprehension of exploration and survey techniques. I have to make short statement of my opinion of Guizhou karst, to end the hour-long question session. Questions about Guizhou tourism by local newspaper editor, before mega photo-session on way out for lunch and another display of gross table manners.

Useful discussions with Yang re a caver visit. Zhang, Yang and He all insist that I will return, with great enthusiasm. They will get provincial government backing, will host with house, car and cook in Guiyang and Anshun, along with Chinese cavers, including Zhang Dian. Then we return the compliment with their team of four coming to England. Arrangements all look good and set for us to go to Guizhou next year. University pays my hotel bill, but is most sorry that I must pay for my train ticket with FEC, which they do not have.

Afternoon visit to Dixia Gongyuan Park, with show cave through limestone ridge, not helped by gaudy coloured lights. Then back to hotel to collect train ticket, and to station. Zhang's son, Tingshan, is also coming to Chongqing, on his way back to university at Nanchung. He has no seat, but newspaper editor has clout, and soon produces a seat number; capitalism works ok, or is it just bureaucracy. First class lounge and soon onto train laden with apples amid effusive goodbyes from eight professors and deans. Train leaves at 4.20pm for 12 hours to Chongqing. Soft-class compartment of four berths, with bedding, hot water, lamp (no bulb), potted plant and net curtains, and one girl attendant. Dinner served in next coach, good food and beer but no cold water. Some good window-gazing for three hours until dusk, with an impressive limestone gorge climbing out of Wu Jiang valley.

Wednesday August 29, Chongqing

Up at 4am in dark, with heavy rain during electric storm. Train is steam-hauled through suburbs of Chongqing, a huge city of six million people, Out through huge station with hundreds of people sleeping on concourse, and total chaos until Tingshan finds a taxi. Through tunnel into city, to huge Renmin Binyuan (hotel), and sit in lobby to write diary until dawn. At 8, find ticket office, and boat ticket is there waiting for me; third-class, 50Y for three days to Wuhan. Also learn I can book a train Wuhan to Beijing, which means all travel hassles over until I meet the dreaded Intourist. Cannot stay on boat overnight, so book room in Renmin hotel; good but in north wing and have to go out in the rain to reach it. Tingshan has to go in another room as Chinese and Westerners not allowed to share, and his room costs half mine. Buy a cola; local brew and second-worst ever (after Guilin Cola).

Morning walkabout in the rain. Chongqing is huge, dirty, grotty, chaotic, draped over a great sandstone hill, endless blocks of flats, like Hong Kong but no colour; really a fairly ghastly place. They call it Fog City, perpetual cloud, drizzle, rain or searing heat. The rivers look good though, with most boats on the Jialing, because the Yangtze has a powerful current. See ferry arrive at Chaotianmen; looks OK. Then lunch at hotel on fixed menu. Hotel is big and ugly and includes vast Renmin Hall, built in Russian era and rain leaks in everywhere. Who but the Russians would design a hotel in a city of rain, with two wings and no inside connections.

Rain stops, so afternoon walkabout beneath overcast sky. Rivers are now very high, with little mud exposed along the banks of the Jialing, But the town is dirty, and smells bad. Clothing is odd; sandals with metal heels, high-heel sandals for men, trousers rolled up usually to different heights; girls in nylon knee stockings, generally wrinkled, even with skirts; clothes too thin to hide underwear, just the occasional smart person. Main street is crowded with people and buses; no bicycles because of hills. Department store sells everything, but Friendship Store has little except Kodak film; advertises Olympus OM1 camera at £1500, nine times the price in England; but Chinese cameras are very cheap. Big sale of radios and tape recorders.

Back at hotel, pay for boat ticket and order train ticket Wuhan to Beijing, with choice of three trains; don't know if it will work, but promised that a CITS taxi will be at the boat dock. I say goodbye to Tingshan who has to go to catch a bus. Return to room and just catch service attendant before she pours away all my carefully cooled water to replace it with boiling water. I buy a cold soda water, which is better than dreadful local cola.



All life is on the back-streets in Chongqing.



Ferries and barges on the Jialing River in Chongqing, with the brown waters of the Yangtze joining beyond.

Thursday August 30, Yangtze boat through Red Basin

Up at 5.30, as hotel bus leaves for boat dock at 6am. No rain and some breaks in the cloud. Onto boat for chaos of bed allocation. There are only a few third-class cabins, and I have a bed in a cabin of four, with three Hong Kong Chinese, one girl speaking a little English. Second-class has a ludicrously large share of the boat, with its own spacious lounge. Third-class has no lounge and no seats anywhere. Fourth-class is deck below with 20 beds per dormitory. Fifth-class is sleeping on the deck in fourth-class. So much for proletarian equality. The gents' loo is much more equal: one long stainless steel trough, fight to get a space, then one foot either side to squat over it, with nose almost into bum-crease of the gent in front.

Boat leaves on time at 7am, and soon into current of red water. River level can clearly rise another 10m or drop by 15m. Passes many towns, large blocks of flats, industry, pollution, boat yards. Mostly between banks of sandstone 50-100 metres high. Rock ribs create narrows and rapids; plenty of whitewater and whirlpools, so difficult navigation, though lots of buoys. Many boats on river, a few junks, some with rowers working hard, one junk pulled by a set of four trackers, but mainly tugs with barges, and a few ferries. We use the current in mid-river, upstream they stay close to banks. A fast trip downstream, with ever-changing scenery.

Chaotic scrum for meal tickets. I have a breakfast in fourth-class dining room, but food awful and next to inedible. Some German girls who speak Chinese elucidate that third-class dining room will open at 12 for lunch, and looks the best bet. Time goes slowly and easy to take too many photos. I sit on floor near stern, ever amazed at standing waves in river current.

At 11am, call at Fuling; chaos as people crowd onto the lower decks with mountainous loads of gear. Then dining room opens for a really good lunch. But then room has to be closed again, but it's the only place to sit in comfort. We ask to take chairs out onto deck, and surprised when they say yes, as long as we take care of them. So we sit on them on deck at back out of the rain. Some Chinese try to get chairs, but refused; only for foreign guests!

River continues between low sandstone cliffs. All land is terraced, many houses, and wires. and small factories with major pollution.. Each port has great concrete ramp with inclined railways so cranes can move up or down with water level. Some rain in afternoon. Then chaos when a deckhand hoses our upper deck and soaks everyone on the lower deck. Good dinner at 5pm.

Then into Wanxian. Walk up steep steps into town with maybe quarter of a million folk living in tower blocks. Factories and bad smoke pollution. Ferry across the river (no bridges between Chongqing and Wuhan) has queue of trucks; busy port, but people swimming in the river!

Friday August 31, Yangtze Gorges

Boat leaves at 5am, and radio starts at 6.30. Up for photos of sunrise on the river now into a much deeper valley. Good Western breakfast of eggs and toast, then the deck starts to fill up. Eventually the five of us foreigners only are allowed onto the empty upper deck for photos through the 5-km-long Qutang Gorge. Everyone else



Limestone cliffs and turbulent water in the Qutang Gorge.

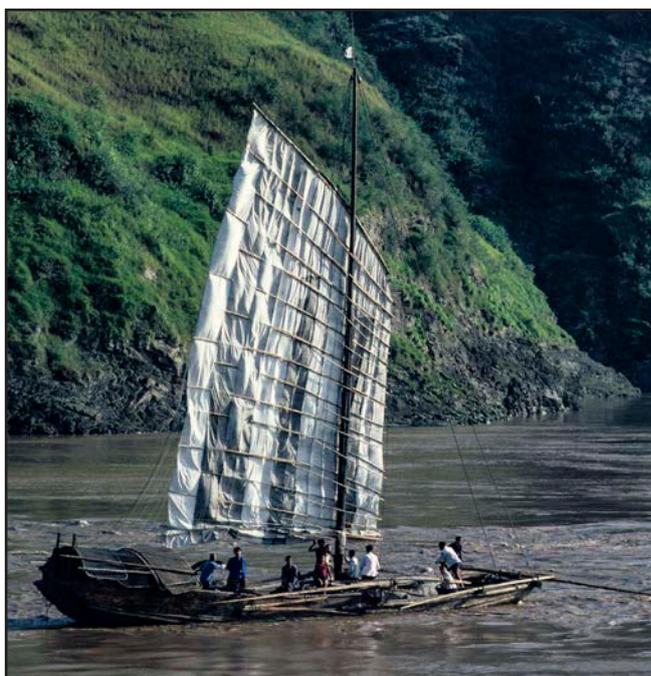
crammed along the sides of the lower decks, and after the gorge we have to go down again; bureaucratic madness. But the gorge is spectacular between vertical limestone cliffs rising hundreds of metres above the river edges. Weather turns good too. Fabulous trip. Notable that the future Yangtze Dam will have almost no visual impact on this gorge, and little on the others, but will provide flat water for shipping, instead of the whitewater (actually brown) that makes parts of the ferry ride quite exciting. Note the local name of the river: Chang Jiang = Long River.

Then between 10 and 11 am, through the Wuxia Gorge, 40 km long, again in bright sunshine. Some vertical walls of limestone, small towns on steep slopes between.

Fishermen in small boats mid-river, a few freight boats, one ferry going upstream, bloated dead bodies going down. Through this gorge, top deck is reserved for group photos. Meanwhile another good lunch.

After brief stop at Badong, enter Xiling Gorge at 1pm. This is the most massive of the three gorges, with some huge limestone cliffs above steep green slopes. Many caves in sight, and one large resurgence. Loaded coal barges going downstream. Cross a breached anticline where granite is exposed beneath the thick limestones (and will become the site for the Yangtze Dam some years hence).

Soon after 3pm leave the gorge and approach the Gezhouba Dam, with large hydro-electric plant and with a single lock on the north side dropping ships by 15 metres. Town downstream has massive blocks of flats. Another brief stop at Yiechang, then out onto the Yellow Plain, clear of the hills. Then stop for most of the night at Yidu, where many new fifth-class passengers are crowded into the corridors.



Easy ride downstream for a sailing junk in the Yangtze Gorges.

Saturday September 1, Yangtze Plain

A cool, grey but dry, morning on a slow-flowing river a kilometre wide across a vast floodplain with distant levees, scattered farms and just a few towns. Another good breakfast and then a chair on the back deck with few other people up and about. Four attempts at docking at Yueyang, one hitting the floating dock so hard that the waiting crowds are thrown about. It's the only large town in the day, and many Hong Kong folk leave to catch a train south.

After lunch, half an hour in the ship's office to pay meal bills; 2 x 9 is calculated on an abacus, then all the bills are in quadruplicate with little bits of carbon paper. Also learn the prices (all for the full three-day ride): First class 220Y (only for tour groups and not on this boat); Second class 110Y (two to a cabin and same food as us); Third class 47Y (four to a cabin); Fourth class 33Y (in dormitories), Fifth class 23Y (on the floor). I definitely have the best deal in Third. Food is 12Y per day in the smart dining room.

Headwind on the river, choppy water, few boats, but including some large modern oil barges. With only half the engines working, a very slow journey, even downstream, and prospect of a late arrival in Wuhan and missing the train #62 that Song will meet in Beijing. But nothing can be done and the river meanders endlessly onwards. Darkness falls and then the lights of Wuhan come into view. Sail beneath the impressive double-deck bridge (built 1957, first across the Yangtze) and up to the dock, where girl from CITS is waiting.

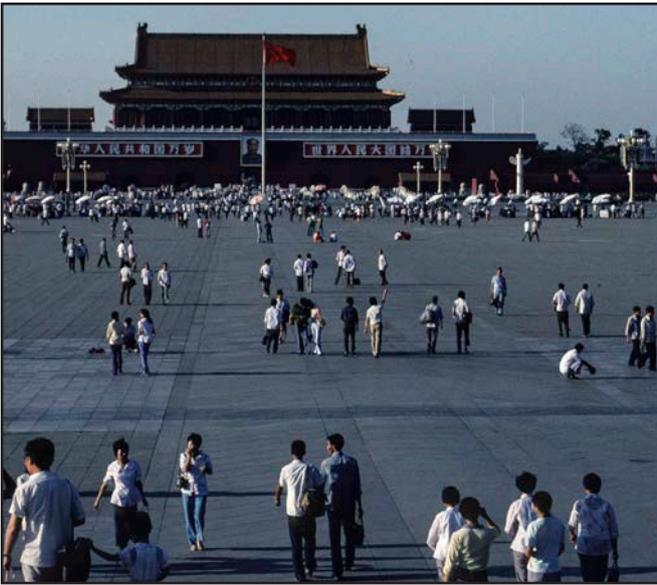
Taxi to train station, and she manages to buy a hard berth on train #150, having reserved and then sold a soft berth on the train we had now missed, and there was no space on train #62. Train came from Guiyang, and as usual full with normal fighting to get on. And so off into the night, due to take 20 hours for the 1200 km to Beijing.

Sunday September 2, Yellow Plain

Alarm to wake at 6am, to see some of the loess country (with numerous man-made caves) before crossing the Huang He (Yellow River) – not as large as the Yangtze and not yet between the giant levees that start downstream. Rest of day is across incredibly featureless, dry Yellow Plain, with endless poor cropping, mainly wheat, no rice, some trees. Distant mountains. Coal mines, power stations, large industrial



Waiting on for a train at a small town on the Yellow Plain.



Tiananmen Square, with Mao's portrait over entrance to Gugong.

They will need it then; 25-year celebrations (since 1949 founding by Mao) will draw huge crowds to Beijing and all foreigners are banned from city for 20 days.

Hotel is superb. Bamboo Garden, old Chinese style built around garden of trees and bamboo. Single room with TV and air-con for 45Y, cf 200Y in large central hotels. Song leaves, and I have excellent dinner of hot Sichuan chicken etc in outside restaurant, with a genuine Coke. On TV all songs have captions beneath, because singing Chinese means that the note/tone changes the meaning; ma = mother, horse, scold or jute depending on inflexion; what a crazy language.

Monday September 3, Beijing

Song arrives at 7.40, and we set off into rush-hour traffic. Long waits at lights on ring-road, and millions of bicycles. Song's driver is pathetic; a real white-liner always in left lane and in the longest queue; and cannot read road signs, yet he is a professional driver!! Into BP office at 9am, Mike Whittal very helpful, also Anita Yap. They have my Russian visa (arrived a week ago), along with train reservation and a cold Coke. Down to station; long queues and chaos, but sent to International Office at hotel nearby, not easy to find as sign has fallen off. Train ticket costs £100 in hard class. Soft is £140 and deluxe £160, but hard and soft are both four to a compartment. Then to Polish embassy, but it is only open Monday, Wednesday and Friday 8.30am to 10.30am; so already closed and have to hope I can get a visa when in Moscow.

Round to Friendship Hotel to buy Cokes for train, but they only have Fanta. They cannot change money, so direct us to China Bank, but when we get there it has been demolished; find the new one round the corner. Multiple forms to change remaining FEC into GBP. Help out French couple who speak no English and have only a French credit card which the bank will not accept. I translate to Song, and he translates to bank, but there is little we can do. Never trust credit cards! Then back to hotel for lunch at 12.30. Wasted morning, but saw some of Beijing. Huge roads (Changan is eight lanes) and vast cycle tracks, many trees. Tiananmen Square is enormous, and the Gugong (Forbidden City, the old palace) looks good, but no time for visit.

At 1.30pm go out to Song's Institute of Geography, 8 km out of town in pleasant countryside, but stark building. Give seminar on Java to a group of eight karst specialist, with Song translating, and questions mainly on geomorphology. Then out to Summer Palace for walkabout and views of countryside before back to hotel. At 8pm, Song comes round with Prof Lu Yaoru, with his giant *China Karst* book in draft. Most impressive and we have long discussions on scope for a version in English, to replace his 1976 edition. Talk of other publications, including Marjorie Sweeting's chapter in Stoddard's book on China geomorphology: a deadly combination of authors, or should we say deathly. I give Song a copy of our Java paper, and they leave at 10pm.

towns. Busy railway (keep to the left); train the other way every five minutes or so; most passenger trains diesel-hauled, some of them and all freight steam-hauled. Notice the noise of cicadas for first time since Guilin.

Late afternoon into Beijing, and wait for half an hour outside exit for Song, who had got onto the platform to meet train #62, but eventually no problem. Weather is hot, hordes of people in station square but none of the fighting chaos of the southern cities. Meet up with Song, wife (Jiang Yanan) and daughter, and we go in Institute jeep to hotel.

Beijing is large, expansive city, mainly high-rise blocks and also the hutongs of older houses, but vast boulevards and plenty of greenery all across flat plain. Drive round ring-road, a six-lane empty highway built on line of old city walls (destroyed) with a metro beneath due to open on October 1st.



Old lady hobbling around on her bound feet.

Tuesday September 4, Great Wall

Up at 7am for Song and his wife, with driver in Romanian jeep, for day out to the Wall. Grand highway most of the way, four lanes but not used due to lack of lane control; strings of buses up last road climbing 700m up to the Badaling Pass. Usual abysmal driving for more than an hour. As Nixon said 'it's a great wall', most impressive scale and only the northernmost of five walls, with all others in poor condition. Wall is six metres high and wide, granite blocks below and concrete or clay bricks above. Much of it very steep with handrails for the panicky, with deep footsteps worn into bricks since 1949. We walked and climbed east amid huge crowds to a tower, then beyond had a little peace.

Back down from hills, pass fine southern gate, out onto plains and up next valley east to Ming Tombs, spread across wide basin. Picnic lunch (too much food again) at peaceful unrestored Xian Ling tomb. Then round to Chang Ling tomb, entrance fee of a whole 10 fen; series of fine buildings, one with huge timber columns each a 10-ton trunk of nammu tree from Yunnan; and others with huge marble slabs up to seven metres long. Actual tomb is beneath an earth hill 20 metres high and 150m across, built by workers who were all then killed to keep the location secret. Then to Ding Ling tomb with many tourists (all Chinese); fine vaulted rooms in artificial hill, huge marble slabs, including doors three metres tall and with hinges all carved from single slabs; amazing workmanship. Blocks dragged to site on ice roads made between low earth dams with wells every 500m for 80km. Then to Ming Tombs Reservoir (Shisanling) with earth dam built 1959 on Mao's orders with no geological investigation; so no water because it all leaks through limestone beneath the alluvium. Out past the well-known animal statues.

Quick visit to Tiananmen Square. Vast, impressive, no parking, lots of photographers, bicycles, huge People's Hall in Russian style, over-large museum, and massive Mao tomb though now rarely open. His portrait reigns over gate to Forbidden City, now a museum-park, but again no time to visit. Song finds the numbered paving stone in the square where he had to stand during the great Mao parades. Back to hotel for dinner.

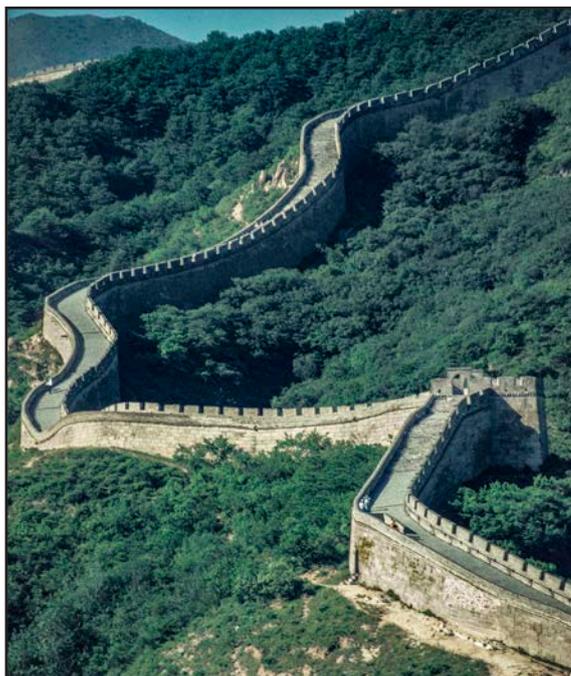
Wednesday September 5, train to Russia

Up early and Song comes for me before 7am. Straight to the station and the spacious comfort of the International Waiting Room. Train is excellent (the Chinese train, not a Russian one), compartment of four, with two upper folding beds, lots of space, table, constant hot water from male coach attendant. I share with Konrad, a really nice Polish guy from his Beijing embassy on his way home to Warsaw, and John, a New York pansy who is doing the Asia trip and is a real wet. Coach is mainly full of Westerners, a lot of Germans, some Americans and two English; just a few Chinese and no Russians (because it is the Chinese train). Also meet Steve Hencher, with his family in soft class on his way from the Hong Kong Geotechnical Office to join Alastair Lumsden at Leeds University.

Notable that ticket through to East Berlin is only an extra £33; as far as can be booked from Beijing and maybe the cheapest way back to England. Train is so spacious that it is an excellent way to travel. It has twelve coaches, with eight of them hard class; can only be about 300 passengers in total; hauled by two diesels as far as Mongolian border

Hazy day over Badaling Pass, then across dry and dusty plains, with some loess and barchan dunes, then wide grasslands with scattered houses of mud bricks and thatch. Excellent cheap lunch in Chinese dining car with Konrad, while John sleeps (he is all travelled out, and sees nothing of the world outside). Attendant needs more to keep him busy; keeps closing all the net curtains, which I re-open, and vacuuming the corridor.

Dull weather and rain through Datong, with many massive steam locomotives around factory where they are still being made. Wide open spaces, thinly populated, a few horses, goats and sheep, meandering rivers, and increasing birch trees. Further north supports just the thinnest grass cover; clay-house villages widely spaced, a few peasants trudging between with horses; cold, wet and windy semi-desert with deeply cracked ground after



Great Wall beyond the tourist crowds at Badaling.



Rails across the Mongolian Steppes; utterly beautiful.

long drought. Like the Prairies but harsher. Villages are just houses with few windows beside piles of hay, and all the people stare at the passing train.

Darkness in Erenhot, and Chinese border control all very efficient with Customs and Passport officials coming through the train. Then down to vast shed where the entire train is lifted into the air and the bogies are changed to the five-foot Russian gauge (though a change of locomotive and dining car for each country). Everyone out and watching in very casual atmosphere. Back on train for sociable evening. Through Mongolian border control, with windows all locked and surrounded by soldiers with machine guns. Midnight before into comfortable berth.

Thursday September 6, through Mongolia

Wake at 6am to beautiful morning. Endless flat grassland and nothing: the Steppes. Villages of timber houses and yurts (known locally as gers) many miles apart, and infinite space flat to the horizons with a cold north wind. Stop at remote small town; lots of Russian soldiers and military trains. People all wrapped up against cold wind beneath cloudless blue sky. Further north the flatness turns into rolling hills, but still endless grassland; scattered herds of camels, sheep, horses and cattle.

Life on the train settles into routine, and the Chinese dining car is sadly missed. John wanders about in a dreamworld saying it is all 'far out'; Konrad is either asleep, talking repetitively to anyone who will listen, or good-naturedly inebriated; Elisa is the most sane company. People sleep a lot, but I am still mesmerised by the landscape. First trees on the way down a broad valley into Ulan Bator: a city of high-rise flats, great stockpiles of Russian equipment, and Russian soldiers everywhere. Many Mongolian people in colourful traditional dress, with thick warm clothes.

More grassland on gentle climb out of Ulan Bator; herds of sheep and goats with shepherds on horseback, one camel train, isolated yurts. Long winding descent from mountains, just a river, railway and wires but no road. Pines and birches, beautiful colours, we are into autumn. Then more grasslands, and more villages, each with a brightly painted kids' playground adjacent to the railway; perhaps a bit of PR for travellers.

Good dinner of beef stroganoff for one US dollar in Mongolian dining car, and watch trains of armour, missiles and troops (in bunk-trucks) going in other direction. Darkness to the Russian frontier; again formalities on the train; take hours, though no hassles or searches and the officials are very civil if a bit humourless. Konrad continues to talk rubbish about his wonderful diplomatic privileges, and all his prophecies turn out wrong. John sleeps through everything. Eventually the guards fade away, and we walk to a bank to buy roubles, but they only take cash. Then off into the night, and sleep.



The front of our train, as it winds its way over the hilly parts of Mongolia's grasslands.

Friday September 7, past Lake Baikal

Wake at 7.30am to leaden skies. Cold, dry, overcast, everyone else still asleep; the Chinese attendant re-lighting his coal-burning stove for the endless hot water. Outside, the taiga of endless birch trees, along the shores of Lake Baikal with waves onto gravel beaches. farms and small villages with houses of logs and board and asphalt roofs. TV masts, power lines, dirt roads, clearly second world and not third. Train is electric, and there are many freight trains facing both ways on station loops in small towns. Round southern end of lake, weather improves and the tree colours are beautiful; mountains in the distance. Many small villages, pine woods, lumber mills and masses of cut timber washed up on the lake shore. The water is clear and unpolluted. We stop at Shidanka, a large and busy town. Konrad finds a soul-mate in a drunken Swiss; he still drinks a bottle of spirit a day. John is lost behind dark glasses and his Walkman.



Along the shores of Lake Baikal.

Train climbs up from the lake through thicker woods of pine and birch. Irkutsk is huge city with high-rise blocks, major industry and massive smoke pollution; suburbs of wooden houses with vegetable gardens. Angara River is huge with many small fishing boats, and its valley is urbanised for 100km out of Irkutsk. Bread and cheese for lunch, served by large Russian babushka, old and round with drawn-back hair and very pleasant. Up to Ceremchoy, industry, railway yards, towns, mining, good roads, bright clothes, cars, kids on bikes, fat women, thick clothes even on a warm sunny day, good houses, new flats, painted houses, corrugated iron roofs. Then more open country with wheat, larch and birch. Konrad is out cold, John still on his Walkman, the Chinese still in their pyjamas (it's 4pm) cooking mountains of food in their compartment.

Zoima is a large town beyond a river half-choked with cut timber; station is a hive of activity with large women selling tomatoes, cream cakes, carrot jam and other oddities. Onwards across rolling country, across broad rivers gently flowing north, birch woods and pasture but very little arable land. Eastbound trains are mainly freight and pass every four minutes; this is an incredibly busy railway, though all trains at about 50mph. Sun sinks behind cloud during chicken dinner that is good but small portions and more expensive, so no comparison with the departed Chinese dining car.

Saturday September 8, across Siberia

Cloudy dull morning across rolling country mainly of woodland or pasture. Villages of wooden houses and vegetable gardens could be in Norway except for the huge fields of potatoes and cabbages. Krasnoyarsk is huge industrial city with factories and smoke pollution; busy roads, full buses, kids walking to school, workers waiting for local trains, rows of lock-up garages. Over enormous Yenisey River with large docks, lumber barges and stored tractors; into station beside large square with trolley buses, Lenin mosaic and well-dressed city people.

Then endless birch forest of green pine, yellow birch and some red aspen or maple; many dacha colonies and scattered mines and timber yards. Achinsk is in middle of nowhere but on River Chulyum. Less forest to Bogotol where we stop; buy very good meat and potato buns for lunch, but the town does not look up to much. Always



Krasnoyarsk docks, on the Yenisey River 2500 km from the Arctic Ocean.

exciting to go walkabout when stopped in a decent station because the train moves off with no indication, whistle or anything, but always dead on time to match the timetable that is posted in each coach, which must be checked before any wandering. Police object to any photos on the stations (though OK outside in towns) and soldiers on platforms point rifles at any camera, accompanied by "Niet". So we wait till train is moving out of the station, then open the windows and take photos while we trundle away beyond their control.



Village in the forest of Siberia.

Siberia: living in a village middle of nowhere.

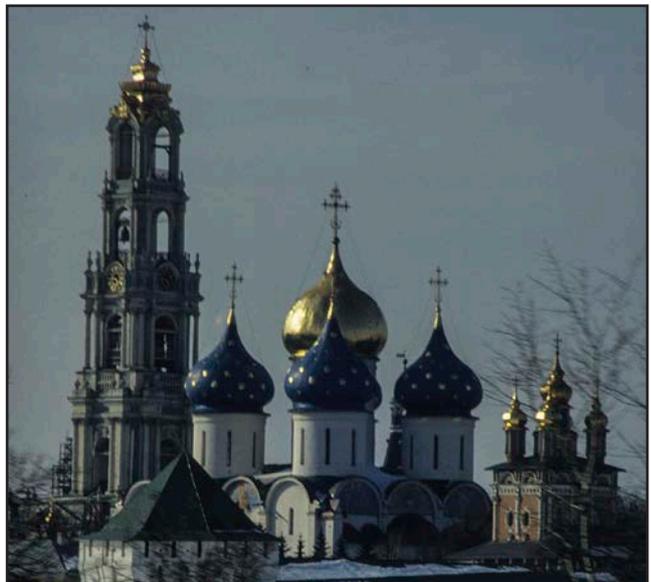
Westwards, country is progressively more featureless and with more farmland, and the train goes ever faster (having changed engines a number of times). Through Tayga, small town with grand station buildings and classic old babushkas along the platforms. Then over the Ob, a huge river between grassland terraces. Flat to the huge industrial city of Novosibirsk, and beyond.

The train garners a more hectic social life, and the atmosphere is really good. A key feature is the dining car that is open all the time, with a menu of small meals, and it is a great meeting place.

Sunday September 9, through the Urals

Wake near Ishim to a beautiful dawn with a blanket of mist over in the fields. Endless flat land and mostly farmed; almost European in character with large wheat fields, small patches of woodland, and other crops too. Grey skies turn to drizzle, while wet farms and villages slide by in the gloom. Flat, featureless, cold and wet to Sverdlovsk where the train is still dead on time. A big city of flats and industry, bleak on a wet Sunday. But folks on the platform and Elisa is offered 50 roubles for her denim jeans (a rouble is worth about a pound).

The Urals are less than inspiring. Railway rises and falls gently over them with local relief of only 200 metres in wooded hills and no sign of distant mountains. Along large river valley past small towns with unmade roads of mud and puddles. Kungur has two fine churches above its river, then farmland to Perm, a large city of blocks of flats, acres of tin garages, and large oil refineries.



Domes on the church at Zagorsk.



Railway across Siberia.

Monday September 10, into Moscow

Dawn before Neya, then out of a fog bank into a beautiful morning with mist hanging in the fields. Trees, meadows and wooden farmhouses; could still be Siberia, but the land is richer and the air is warmer. Cross the blue Volga on way into the large city of Yaroslavi. Then well populated between good farmland all the way to Moscow, which is huge, with train running for half an hour through suburbs dominated by blocks of flats, arriving just before midday. The two Chinese cleaners have tidied the train before we arrive, and quickly disappear for their day off before the return journey; they had an easy life, cleaning the coach every day, gathering all the rubbish into bins, which they then emptied out of a window.



The wonderful St Basil's, with thr Kremlin on the left.

Yaroslavi Station in Moscow is huge, but the Metro is easily found. Superb underground station with marble and granite worth a field-trip lining huge hallways and only 5 kopeks (about 5 pence) to go anywhere. Trains are good and not crowded, but there are no station signs, just loudspeaker announcements. Go to Prospekt Marska and then short walk to Metropol Hotel (one of few that Intourist book foreigners into). The worst and most expensive hotel I have ever been in; reception was slow and very rude, room is small and crummy, shops close before they should, lousy service in restaurant where everything is off except pork cutlet or caviar.

Walk to Red Square; soul-destroying; just the sound of shuffling feet; no music, no laughter, no colour, no light. The Kremlin is ominous, the guards goose-step, but St Basil's is spectacular, though gently decaying. Streets are vast and empty; river is cold and dirty. Gum store is massive and crowded; long waits in insane triple-queue system, where you queue to select, then queue elsewhere to pay, then queue to collect from first place. Back through soulless streets to hotel, collect passport, but nobody knows where Polish embassy is; they have no maps and are totally unhelpful, and this is the main Intourist hotel! Bath, bed and book is the best option.

Tuesday September 11, Moscow

Up at 7am and walk back to Red Square; St Basil's and the Kremlin's golden onion-domes are beautiful in the morning light; but it is cold, and still gloomy silence everywhere. Bach to hotel for breakfast; eggs so badly cooked that they provide a spoon, and again slow, surly service. Vacate room and walk to Metro station; fast train out to suburbs and then trolley bus, and easily find the Polish embassy. Visa takes just 15 minutes. Journey cost 9 kopeks, instead of 5 roubles offered by Intourist. A little disturbed on trolley bus when someone taps me on the shoulder and gives me four kopeks. But I am standing by the ticket machine, so I feed in his coins and then pass him a ticket. And then realise I should get my own ticket on the honesty system. It works.

Walk to Belorinskaya and take Metro back to centre. Buy train ticket after yet more pointless hassles. Long queue for Lenin's tomb, but rest of Red Square empty and dead; no cars, and not allowed to sit down in the entire square. Roads still have little traffic, but pavements are crowded. Impressions are of large people, queues



Long queue for the obligatory visit to Lenin's tomb.

at all food stalls and shops, too many folk in uniforms, a few people well dressed, even one mini-skirt. Belatedly realise that I can go into Kremlin (the old town, not the government offices within). Spectacular buildings, an excess of gold domes on the churches, interior walls of what was the Archangel Cathedral covered with rich paintings; beyond the giant Tsar Bell loomed the Praesidium building.

Metro to Belorinskaya station in rush hour for evening train to Europe. Only one coach goes to Hoek (rest to Paris, Berlin or Ostend). Compartment has three stacked berths, and

I share with an African couple (he Sierra Leone, she Ghana very black and beautiful), until conductor moves me into an empty compartment to myself. Then to dining car for an excellent schnitzel, rice and fruit juice with Elisa, Mat and many of the Beijing crowd who are going to East Berlin.

Wednesday September 12, Poland

Cold dawn, then train heating comes on. Across endless flat farmland of the North European Plain, and an early approach to large city of Brest. Passport control on the train, then into sheds for the bogie change but photos not allowed and we all have to stay in the coaches;



Horse at work on a farm in Poland.

this is Russia, so different from the relaxed border from China to Mongolia. Then tedious delays through Customs and for bank, and the Berlin train has already separated and gone. On train again, cross border with wire fence, zone of land-mines and many soldiers with machine guns.

Flat, wet and featureless across eastern Poland; grass, wheat and a few cows, small farmhouses, tractors and horses at work in the fields. Warsaw is more westernised; large, impressive city and so much life and colour; through a short tunnel, the first since Lake Baikal. Countryside is mostly arable, many roads (unlike Russia), many birds (not all eaten as in China), cows tethered in circles of eaten grass, horse-drawn ploughs, and the people are cheerful (unlike Russia). It's Europe, but it's different.

Walk to next coach looking for dining car, and find that the one coach from Moscow is tagged onto the back of a Polish train, with friendly Poles in a buffet car where I manage to buy chicken and a drink for two US dollars and a deutschmark because I have no zlotys. The train is good, fast and electric, passing some steam locos and double-deck suburban coaches. Unexciting journey to border where more delays into darkness. Berlin looks good by night, with more bright lights than anywhere since Hong Kong; many canals, and the sadness of the Wall.

Thursday September 13, back to England

A misty dawn across the Dutch border, then the sun burns clear to a clear day. Everywhere is so flat. The European character does distinguish it from Poland, but the numerous bicycles are a reflection of China. Lucky to still have the compartment to myself; noticeable that both trains have had empty berths. Depressing how many African students are on the way from Moscow universities, looks like cheap manipulation of lefties by the Russians.

Breakfast at Hoek at 10am, then onto pleasantly uncrowded ferry, sailing into sea mist over almost calm water across to Harwich. Sadly the direct train to Nottingham (and on to Blackpool) only connects with the overnight ferry. So it's a train into London, and then another to Nottingham.

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