



## 020131 Speed Tour: Beijing in 24 Hours

Jeff and I arrived in Beijing too late to do much else other than to book a hotel very close to the Forbidden City and to get an early dinner (our first meal of the day). So the next day, we got up early for what would be a speed tour of Beijing: most of the major sites in one day. We wandered over to Tiananmen square with the intention of looking like we wanted to go to the Great Wall. We only had to walk a few steps and make eye contact with a few touts before we had bargained for a taxi to take us to the Badaling section of the Great Wall.

Badaling is a restored section with handrails and even steps. It is usually crowded during the summer, but Jeff and I wandered in the opposite direction of the rest of the tourists and we had the wall to ourselves. I asked one of the guards how many people had passed him that day and he said that we were only the 3rd and 4th. I have now been to the Great Wall five times and it never fails to impress me with its majesty. You can see the wall snake off before you as it twists it's way along the peaks of the mountains. This was my second trip to Badaling with the other three trips to the Simatai section which is unrestored. Jeff had wanted to do a tour where you spend all day walking the wall, but our limited time in Beijing didn't allow it which is too bad. Maybe the next trip.

After the Great Wall, we toured the Forbidden City. Jeff took the audio tour and was led by Roger Moore through the various sites. The Forbidden City is immense with only small parts open to the public, but you get a sense of the vastness of the complex.

After the city, we were off to the Silk Market to buy more souvenirs. The Silk Market is an alleyway right outside the US embassy where you can buy knockoffs of pretty much any famous clothing maker. You see North Face, Polo, Rolex, etc. I have seen foreigners bragging that they had bought a North Face jacket for only \$75, a fraction of what it would be in the US. Yes, well that would be what it would cost if it were REAL. Some of the items for sale are good quality and are made by the factories that make the real thing. They just leave out the important things like the Gore-Tex lining that adds the cost to the real jacket. Other things suck as the North Face bag that Carol bought or a Polo shirt that I bought in the summer of 2000 tended to fall apart quickly. But of course, when you pay \$4 for a shirt, you get what you pay for.

The big thing this were was cashmere, especially Pashmere made in Inner Mongolia. We bought more silk and cashmere and had fun with the vendors who can all speak at least English. The vendors are very astute and can size up their customers quickly. I would try to tell them that I was from Denmark to throw them off, but most would listen to me speak and claim that I had a US accent, not a Danish one.

I was haggling with one of the vendors for some beautiful silk scarves as well as some wool ones. She would not name a price so, since it was the last shop in the alley I had seen what things were going for and named a low price. The vendor complained and hemmed and hawed, but I realized that I was going to get the price, so I didn't budge. That is until she said told me that I "haggled like a girl," At that point, I did the old walk away trick for about 10 meters until I heard her call out "ok, one hundred" which was the price that I wanted. I walked back and she said "ok, 120" at which point people who had heard her earlier started to boo. So, I got my scarves, but not a

bag to put them into since she said that I was robbing her. However, Jeff then walked up and she offered to sell him some cashmere for even cheaper! Perhaps to prove that I could have gone lower. We wound up cleaning up and as we walked off she told Jeff, “your friend is very pretty to me.” Everyone remains friends at the end of the day.

Granted, it is easier just to walk into a supermarket or a Target and just pay whatever the price is on the tag. But, the part about haggling that I miss the most is the human interaction. The give and take of the game can be a lot of fun, even if you still cant get the Chinese price. I think that in the US we have allowed ourselves to become so isolated with pay at the pump, internet shopping and a quick swipe of our credit cards at the register. You can go you whole day without talking to another human being if you don’t really want to. The sterility can be nice some days, but I think that it is missing a human side which you can still find everywhere in China, whether you want it or not.

On Monday, we checked out of our hotel, threw our bags into left luggage and wandered around Tiananmen once more looking for some Olympic T-shirts. Considering all of the clothing that we saw in the Silk Market, these proved surprisingly difficult to find.

After some lunch we bid farewell to Beijing with some final video in Tiananmen Square and by hailing a cab to take us to the airport bus which left from the International Hotel. I had just been commenting, or actually lamenting to Jeff that China, especially Beijing is becoming a much easier place to travel in and no longer as much of a satisfying challenge. I assume that Beijing will become even more user friendly as the city gears up for the 2008 Olympics. Even handicapped accessible signs are starting to appear and cab drivers are required by the government to learn some English. Of course, after having said this, our cab driver tried to take us to the wrong hotel. Fortunately, I have spent over a month in Beijing between all of my visitors and realized that we were going in the totally wrong direction. I had to tell the driver how to get to the hotel and kept asking him to go faster or we would miss our bus. It turned out that the characters for the hotel were wrong in the Lonely Planet guidebook. So, maybe China will remain a challenge after all. :)

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