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Reflections

I had an interesting conversation the other day about group tours. A friend of mine said he would never consider joining a group tour because it is too regimented and not flexible enough. Besides, he added, who would want to travel for days at a time with strangers?

Fortunately for us there are those who feel otherwise. What many people often don't realize is that group travel is an excellent way to meet interesting, like-minded people while seeing a part of the world they might otherwise not visit. And with all the stress and responsibility that fall to each of us in our daily life, what a pleasure it is to have your meals prepared and activities arranged by someone else!

Another aspect of group travel that is often overlooked — and perennially undervalued — is what a local guide adds to your travel experience. A skilled guide can open doors to unique experiences and give exclusive insights into the people, customs, history, and culture of the land being explored.

Besides arranging hotels, sightseeing, and meals, the job of a tour company like TravelQuest is to find those exceptional local guides who reveal their land, their traditions, and even their hearts to travelers. There is not a guidebook on Earth that can provide an equivalent experience.

Regards . . .



Aram Kaprielian



China: Silk Road, Great Wall

In a country as big as China (it's the fourth largest in area and only slightly smaller than the United States), geographical diversity is to be expected. Overlay 5,000 years of history and 1.3 billion people onto that geography, and the result is an eclectic mix of sights, sounds, tastes, and smells that is impossible to categorize and challenging to fully grasp. China is a fascinating land that tends to draw visitors back, mainly because it's impossible to take in even a fraction of what the country has to offer during a single visit. So what's a traveler to do to get the most out of a trip to this vast land? Themed travel is the key.

World Heritage Sites

Many of China's best-known sites, including the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Summer Palace, and Terracotta Warriors, often top most travelers' lists. But few know

that these four sites, and 31 more, belong to the UNESCO World Heritage List. This list is as varied as China itself. From ancient structures and cultural relics to natural sites such as the Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries and the South China Karst formations (which include the stone forests of Shilin), a traveler could do worse than discover the country via the UNESCO catalog.

The Silk Road

Another option is to explore at least part of the Silk Road. This is one of the world's oldest trade routes, but its name is a bit of a misnomer. Silk was not the only commodity passing along this 5,000-mile-long corridor. Caravans heading west also contained ceramics, jade and bronze objects, paper, and gunpowder. On the return trip merchants transported ivory, glass, wool, and gold.

There was no single "highway," either.

Even within China there were several branches of the Silk Road. Xi'an is generally considered to be the start of the route, which headed west past Jiayuguan to Dunhuang, where it branched into a northern and southern route. Beyond the borders of China, the Road split numerous times, but all paths ultimately led to the civilizations of the Mediterranean region.

Above: Part of the Great Wall near Beijing (MacMillan Space Centre). **Left:** The Mingsha Shan (Singing Sand Dune) near Dunhuang (Aram Kaprielian).



The Silk Road opened during the 2nd century BC, flourished for centuries, and peaked between 600 and 900 AD. After a slight decline, it revived during the 13th century, as documented by Marco Polo. But with the rise of sea routes between China and the West, the Silk Road, and the infrastructure that supported it, was abandoned to the sand.

In addition to goods, new ideas in art, philosophy, and religion also traveled the Silk Road. One of the most influential outside forces was Buddhism; by the 4th century AD it was the official religion across much of northern China. The remains of Buddhist art can be found all along the Silk Road, but few sites are as stunning as the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang.

Astronomy in China

With two total solar eclipses touching China in the space of 12 months (Aug 1, 2008, and July 22, 2009), astronomy is an obvious theme. And why not. After all, astronomy is one of China's oldest sciences. The first record of a total eclipse of the Sun (in archaic script scratched on animal bones) was made more than 3,200 years ago; records of lunar eclipses go back another 200 years.

Almost all the emperors had a Bureau of Astronomy attached to their court. These professional astronomers (it was, after all, their livelihood) were charged with recording all celestial sights including lunar and solar

eclipses, the appearance of sunspots, the movements of the Moon and



Emperor Qin's Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an (Aram Kaprielian).

For More Information About China . . .

Snippets of China: www.chinapage.com/main2.html

Astronomy and Mathematics: www.china.org.cn/e-gudai/6.htm

The Silk Road: <http://www.ess.uci.edu/~oliver/silk.html>

Great Wall 360° Panoramas: www.thechinaguide.com/great_wall_of_china

Concise History (for kids and adults): www.historyforkids.org/learn/china

The Great Wall From Above

The Great Wall is the only manmade structure visible from space . . . fact or urban myth?

Sorry, it's a myth. There are lots of things that can be seen from low Earth orbit: highways, airports, harbors, cities, and even large ships.

But can astronauts actually see the Great Wall from space? A definite maybe. It can be spotted using binoculars, but according to Space Station astronaut Ed Lu, finding it without optical aid is challenging. Because the Wall is so narrow and constructed of materials that blend into the surrounding countryside, it's a lot less visible than other physical signs of civilization. To see the Wall, the lighting has to be perfect and you need to know exactly where to look. Even Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei said he could not see it. So it turns out that from orbit, the Great Wall isn't so great after all.

planets, and the arrival of meteors, comets, and "new stars" in the night sky. They were also responsible for calendar keeping, and by 700 BC astronomers had pinned down the length of the year to 365.25 days.

Structures dedicated to astronomy are rare in China. The most prominent is the Ancient Beijing Observatory, built in 1437 as part of the old city walls (though it's now in central Beijing). On its upper observing platform are a number of large, bronze sky-watching instruments, including a six-foot diameter celestial globe.

However, sites with some astronomical significance are more common than might be imagined. In Beijing, the entire Forbidden City is aligned on a north-south axis, as is the Temple of Heaven (where the Emperor performed winter solstice rituals). In Xi'an, Emperor Qin's tomb is also aligned to the cardinal points. And on the ceilings of numerous Imperial tombs are elaborate, and accurate, star maps.

TravelQuest's website contains information about the 2008 China eclipse trip ([The Ancient Silk Road](#)), as well tour details for the 2009 eclipse called: [In the Footsteps of the Emperors](#).

Profile: Steve Xu



"I am very fortunate to be Chinese by birth and American by choice," says Steve Xu, founder and president of [Champion Holidays](#), "and I am richly blessed with the best of both heritages."

Steve was born and raised in Nanjing, China, a culture-rich city with a prominent place in Chinese history. It served as the capital of China during several historical periods.

Both his parents are teachers, which was very helpful during his early years in school. In 1979, at the age of 16, he was one of the few who passed the strict Chinese university-entrance exams. Because his major was English language and literature, he was one of a small number of students to receive a complete education in Western culture and history.

While still a student Steve was invited to work part-time for the China International Travel Service (CITS), a government-owned agency that, at the time, was the only inbound tour operator in China. This is when he learned, first hand, the differences in culture, living style, and customs between the US and China. In the

early 1980s China was still relatively closed to the outside world and somewhat of a mystery to Westerners. The Western world was equally mysterious to a majority of Chinese.

After several years at CITS, he moved on to international banking and business investment in China. In the early 1990s Steve relocated to the US and became involved in the China tour business. "I found that many American companies selling tours to China were focusing primarily on leisure tours with little in the way of cultural experiences," he recalls. So about 10 years ago *Champion Holidays* was launched with the aim of providing both great value on tours to China *and* true and unique cultural experiences for all visitors.

"Over the years we have created many unique programs for special-interest groups by leveraging our contacts with Chinese cultural and business institutions. For instance, we brought over high-school groups to give musical performances with their Chinese counterparts." Steve can do this because his company has dedicated offices and staff in Beijing and Shanghai who keep a close relationship with many different organizations and vendors in China. "And I travel to China numerous times every year to keep abreast of what is happening over there," he adds.

Steve firmly believes that travel broadens the mind *and* fosters an understanding of different cultures. "Culture-oriented travel is an effective and enjoyable way of enhancing this understanding."

Steve Xu's company, Champion Holidays, is handling TravelQuest's eclipse tours to China in 2008 and 2009.

On the Road

A credit-card company recently ran a series of television ads featuring a band of barbarians attacking people who were using other company's credit cards. The commercial's catchphrase at the end was "What's in YOUR wallet?"

Before you head out on your next trip, peer into your wallet with that very question in mind. After all, do you really need to bring all those membership cards, department-store credit cards, video-rental cards, and others of their ilk? And do you really need to carry your Social Security Card or other government-issued documents (other than your passport and possibly your driver's license)?

Consider the angst that will come from losing your wallet or purse containing all these cards, not to mention the seemingly endless amount of time required to replace all those lost (or worse, stolen) items. Then, to paraphrase another, older commercial "Do leave home without them."

One easy way to do this is to buy a small wallet that's strictly for travel. When the time comes, transfer only those cards you need for the trip and leave the rest behind in your regular wallet (stashed in a safe place, of course). Don't forget to record which cards you're taking, their numbers, and how to cancel them. Keep this list separate and safe in case, heaven forbid, you lose your wallet to a band of marauding barbarians.

Wanted: One Visa

Story and Image by Paul Deans

For those journeying to China with TravelQuest for the 2008 or 2009 eclipse, getting an entry visa will be no big deal. But 25 years ago, acquiring a visa wasn't easy, particularly for individual travelers.

In 1983 I was a writer/producer at the McLaughlin Planetarium in Toronto, Canada. We were creating a planetarium show about Chinese astronomy and wanted to incorporate panoramas and all-skies — specialized sets of images for the domed theater — of Chinese astronomical sites as well as general-interest venues such as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City. No other planetarium had what we needed, so I “volunteered” to go and do the photography. But I required a visa to enter China.

At the time, no tour agency in Toronto would deal with an individual wanting to go to China, and the Chinese consulate in Ottawa was no help. After some research, I discovered that there was a way to get an entry visa. But first, I had to be in Hong Kong.

By now everyone knows the traveler's mantra: In a foreign land, never let your passport out of your sight. But to get my visa, that's exactly what I had to do. According to a thin paperback called *China On Your Own*, which was one of the few books back then dedicated to non-group travel in China, getting a 30-day visa wasn't difficult.

So on my first morning in Hong Kong I stopped at a photo booth in a YMCA and walked away with the usual four-photo strip of head-and-shoulder shots. Then I located a bank. In 1983 credit cards were not yet widely accepted; cash and traveler's checks were still the norm. But cashing them required a passport for ID (at the time in Hong Kong), and since I was about to lose mine, I needed to stock up on cash.

Finally, I headed to the Traveller's Hostel on the 16th floor of the Chungking Mansion in Kowloon, where I filled in some paperwork and handed over HK\$240, my

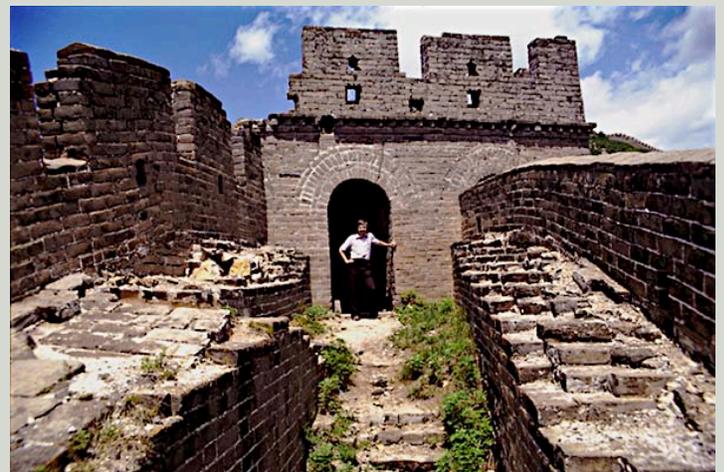
photos, and with some trepidation, my passport. The guidebook said I'd be without a passport for up to three days, but business must have been slow that July, because I was told to come back the following evening.

The next 36 hours were rather nerve-wracking, because I literally felt naked without my passport. Even as I explored the streets of Hong Kong, I kept thinking of what I'd do if the visa was denied or, worse, if my passport didn't come back. The next morning I had meetings at the Hong Kong Space Museum, but I found it hard to concentrate.

In the end, those 36 hours of worry were wasted; my passport with an entry visa was waiting for me when I returned to the Traveller's Hostel. With visa in hand I could book a flight to Beijing and begin my 21-day odyssey through eastern China, with stops at Beijing, Luoyang, Xi'an, and a number of other, more obscure sites.

Carrying more camera gear than clothes, I wasn't the typical independent China traveler, though I faced most of the same travel difficulties — including booking my own transportation (cabs, trains, and airplanes) and finding a hotel at each destination. Nonetheless, I managed to acquire most of the images I needed and, in the process, experienced China in a way that few travelers ever have.

Travel Quest editor, Paul Deans, who went to China again in 1990, is one of the leaders on TQ's Ancient Silk Road tours.



A 1983 self-portrait of the author in the doorway of one of the guard towers in an unreconstructed section of the Great Wall near Beijing.

Making Memories

It's always exciting heading off on a trip, but if you're on a tour and want to take good photos, it can also be a little nerve-racking. After all, you're likely to have only one shot (so to speak) at the sites you visit; going back usually isn't an option. The key to getting the best pictures possible is advance planning.

Do Your Research

Explore your destination *before* you leave home. Visit to the country's official tourism website and look for photos of the sites you'll be visiting. Google each of the major cities on the tour, and then click on "Images" in the

entry bar at the top of the Google results page to bring up pages of thumbnails. Read other travelers' blogs or websites about the places you'll be visiting. The writing likely won't be terrific and the quality of the images may leave something to be desired, but you'll see each place as others have experienced it.

If you didn't do any pre-tour research, do it as soon as you arrive in a city. Head down to the hotel's gift shop or the nearest "tourist trap," and buy a photo book of the city or pick up postcards of the places you're about to visit. In addition to having a preview of each site, you won't need to stop and get postcards everywhere you go!

Time and Tours Wait for No One

Another thing you can't control is the time of day you arrive at each site. If it's getting dark and you don't want to crank up the ISO on your digital camera, you'll have to shoot at slower-than-usual shutter speeds. So support yourself by leaning against a wall, fence, lamppost, or vehicle. Hold your camera with both hands and prop your elbows against your chest; then breathe in, exhale, pause, and shoot. Or go down on one knee, rest your elbow on the other knee, and hold the camera with both hands.

Sometimes the best view is the one directly into the Sun. Go for a silhouette shot instead of the usual scenic snap. If it's a building, try to reposition yourself so the Sun is off to one side, or get close to the subject and go for some artistic close-up shots.

Write to Us

If you'd like to write a little something for *Travel Quest*, here's what you need to know.

Travel tips for "On the Road" and photo hints for "Making Memories" are easy to submit. Just jot them down and fire them off to me at the e-mail address below. If you have a memorable travel tale to tell, we'd love to hear about it. Write it as a Word document (try to keep it to about 600 words in length), include one or more photos, and send the story and images to me as e-mail attachments.

Your tips, hints, travel tales, and any comments you have about *Travel Quest* will reach me at:

editor@TQ-International.com

I look forward to hearing from you!

Paul Deans
Editor, *Travel Quest*

TRAVELQUEST
International

Upcoming Adventures

Eclipse 2008

On *August 1, 2008*, a total eclipse of the Sun sweeps across Earth's northern regions before plunging south through Russia to China. Join us on one of our eclipse-viewing adventures.

North Pole Flight Through Totality

Go airborne. We'll flightsee over the North Pole and intercept the Moon's shadow above the Arctic Ocean.

North Pole Voyage to Totality

Set sail for the North Pole aboard a Russian icebreaker, explore the high Arctic, and see the eclipse from either land or sea.

Grand Passage through Siberia & Great Cities of Russia

Ride the Trans-Siberian Express and/or explore three great Russian cities, and experience totality from outside the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.

The Ancient Silk Road

Travel the legendary Silk Road, ride the famed China Orient Express, and watch the eclipse from the high desert of northern China.

To learn more about our other tours, including the recently announced

Botswana: Under African Skies

please visit our website:

www.OnlineTravelQuest.com.