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## Ni hao Beijing

October 2012, the new direct flight from Zürich to Beijing is just perfect. Not too many people in the plane and time to relax and read.

We have this picture in our heads, 10000 bicycles in the streets of Beijing and I hear the song as well. That was a wrong picture and we had to revise this as well as some other prejudice thinking.

The first impression at the airport at 5 o'clock in the morning, huge place! We trot along with the other passengers to the custom control and wonder where we will need to go afterwards. The first surprise, just after the passport check a young lady is waiting for us, she is from our Hotel. She is smiling and will guide us to the main-hall, our luggage and the booked car pick up. This is luxury pure.

A short train ride of 10min and we are in the arrival hall with the luggage belts. 2 minutes later we are on the way to the car and our guiding lady, smiles and is gone. Now we are in the hands of the driver, who comments that it is too early for traffic jams and we should arrive at the Hotel in approx. 30 min. Beijing is still asleep at least that is how it looks like during our transfer.

The Fairmont Hotel is only a few years old and we move in to our room at the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor, to sleep a bit, what else at 5.30am ?

Thanks to the espresso-machine in our room we are awake and ready to explore. Beijing here we come!

The planned visit is to the Forbidden City by Taxi and here comes the Taxi lesson. The Hotel provides each guest with a little map and business card to show to Taxi drivers, as they don't speak English. But... some of them can't read and are not from Beijing, they came from the countryside to find a job in the city. It is a challenge for both.

The young people did learn English and if you have a question ask a young person, they are very helpful.

But back to our Taxi adventure, Beijing has about 30'000 Taxis and 18 mill. inhabitants plus the tourists. Taxis are a rare species especially in the rush-hour and at the tourist attractions. For us, the bellboy did get a Taxi and instructed the driver where we like to go. The 6 lane streets in the middle of the city are impressive as the traffic converts them to 8-10 lanes. All well mixed, Bentley, Mercedes, scooters, bikes, wheelbarrows and pedestrians. Chaos for us but somehow it works.

The Forbidden City, not forbidden for hawkers, dealers and guides all want to sell something to the numerous tourists. People as far as the eye can see. Before we plunge in, we have to queue for the tickets but if you don't want to wait, dealers offering tickets to you for immediate access but to a premium price. We are patient.

The Forbidden City, today a museum, official the palace museum, was the residence of the Ming and Qing-dynasty rulers. 1406 the building construction commenced and was until 1911 the home of 24 emperors. The area is 720'000 sqm and one will find 9'000 rooms and halls. Since 1987 it belongs to the UNESCO world heritage sites.



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We spent plenty of hours there, did see a lot but then we didn't see everything, it was impossible to cover the ground, so huge. We left 1 hour before closing and tried to find a Taxi. Oops, only a few available and for 4x higher price than on our way to the location. No thank you, we started walking, always watching the street for a free Taxi. 30 minutes later we would have paid the asked price as it will take us hours walking back to Hotel !

The solution was small and on 2 wheels, a scooter with a small cabin in the back just enough space for two. Advantage, I tried to find a positive argument, the guy drove between the cars and avoided the traffic jam but we needed strong nerves ! The driver was very brave or stupid, I don't know the answer. We were more than happy to finally arrive at the Hotel without a scratch.

Day 2, we had a private guide, Jessie, she studied English to become a teacher and during her studies she earned money by being a tourist guide. Finally she did set-up her own business. She did accommodate our wishes on what to see and where to spend more time and also telling us about today's life and her experience as well as the history. We did book her from Switzerland via email.

At 10am she did pick us up at the Hotel with our private car with driver. After our Taxi experience we were glad not to have to worry about this anymore. First day, we have the City on our agenda, something old, something new. Starting with the temple of heaven, Jessie gets the tickets and we enter another world. A beautiful park with old trees and lots of Chinese people, a singer with music and people dance to it. Some exercise machines, yoga-classes for the visitors, all in the park, just join in if you can. They must have bones made out of rubber. Another interesting corner, the marriage-market, parents have a kind of CV of the sons or daughters and exchange information about their kids. Jessie ensures us, this are not arranged marriages just a helping hand, they still can say NO. One mother allows us to have the CV on photo and Jessie translates. He is an IT specialist, 28 years old and is looking for a girl also in the IT world working, 26 years old and not taller than 155cm. Good luck!

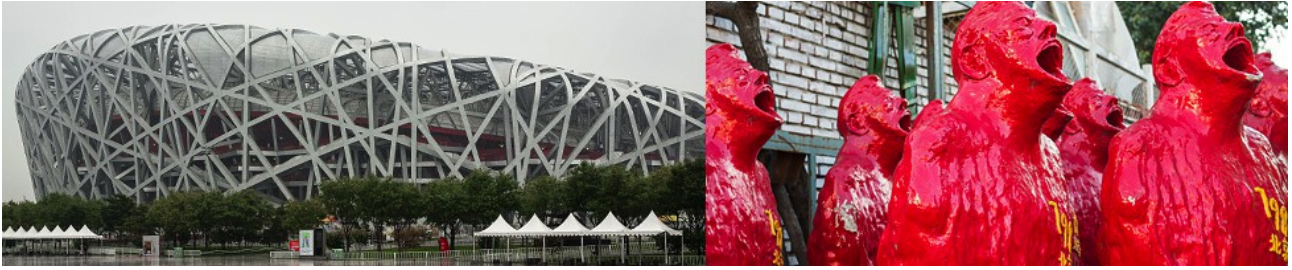
Our driver is waiting for us at the exit and we are driving to the Hutong quarter, those old houses with their traditional shops are so different to the new high-rise buildings, it is a step back in time.

Unfortunately quite a bit of the old houses were destroyed for the Olympics, too much. Now they are more aware that this is their culture.

Lunchtime, Jessie gets us to a Restaurant for Chinese, no way we would know what to order. We ended up having green beans with green chilli, shrimps, minced meat and dumpling, all with tea for 3 persons, for the incredible amount of CHF 15.00 in total.

It drizzles, the umbrella obstructs the view as we are passing the old shops. They sell mainly Chinese crafts, very beautiful colours and clothes or shoes or food. To my disappointment, all not in my size. Even for the shoes I would need to cut off my toes.

We continue our journey, next stop the Opera house, very modern and next the Olympic stadium, the Nest, now it is pouring with rain, we are wet with one minute. It is 3pm and we all it a day, too wet and too cold. Thanks to this weather we discovered our Hotel inside, the Bar, the exhibition, the connection to the next building and of course the restaurant.



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Day3, the weather is very apologetic, it is dry and sunny, the fog or smog is gone, we are able to see the mountains from our room. At 10h we are ready for the excursion to the great wall. One hour drive through rural sites and autumn coloured forest. The rain seem to have clean and cleared everything, it let the colours radiate. The location is Mutianyu where we will clime the wall. The small street is bordered by good stalls and little shops to sell souvenirs, a short ride in a cable car followed by a short walk and here we are. The Great Wall is just great! It is impressive and we are so lucky with the weather, we can see Beijing's skyline on the horizon. What a treat. No more of this, I recommend to let the photos talk to you.

Back in Beijing in the early afternoon, we visit the Art District 798. The area has buildings from 1950 in a Bauhaus-style, the Concept came from East-German Architects. Now it has become an artist quarter. Galleries, sculptures, shops, Cafes and Restaurant, a very good mix. The sun is still shining and we absorb the people, the sculptures and paintings and walk thru the alleys. Our feet are the first to realise it is time to go back to the Hotel. We have to say Good-Bye to our discreet driver and Jessie, she was an excellent guide. Xie xie.

For the dinner Jessie did a booking for us in one of the famous Restaurants which serve Peking duck, the Da Dong. The Taxi gets us there and we see how the street is changing, we drive along the car-saloons of Ferrari, Lamborghini, Porsche and Rolls-Royce, fancy. Stop, we arrived in front of a shopping mall, our Restaurant is at the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, the elevator brings us directly in front of the entrance. Wow, modern , huge and the kitchen for roasting the duck is in the middle, 4 stations with 4 cooks. The smell, I am hungry. We decide for a set menu, a 4 course one. We find the sequel of the servings a bit strange, the dessert came before the main course but on all tables. It was delicious but expensive even for us Swiss.

Close to our Hotel is the silk-market and we are on a shopping tour for souvenirs. 5 floors of tiny shops full of stuff, toys, clothing, suitcases, watches, kitchen items etc. The scarf looks good and we bargain as said in the travel-book. Deal done. That reminds me, Chinese do not expect a tip, not in Taxis, Restaurants etc only the western Hotel staff is different, not all but some open their hand.

We visit the Hutongs again where we missed out on a few attractions due to rain, now it is warm and sunny.

Last day, good weather again and we are brave enough to take the subway to the summer palace across the city. We almost failed at the ticket machine, a friendly young Chinese took my money and got us the tickets. 2 Yuan for 1 hour in the underworld. The summer-palace has a huge park with lakes, islands, boats and artistic gardening. We spend all day there and we are proud of us that we managed to go back by subway without any help only that at this time there a more people in the train, it is getting tight but we have a good overview due to size. We like Beijing and our 5 days of intense sightseeing. Tomorrow we are leaving for Hong Kong.

Regina Fink Blumer

*RFB*

Travel Treasures





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## Hello Hong Kong,

good to be back in Hong Kong, it has been a few years since the last time.

But HK is always worth a visit. It is this mixture between tradition, Chinese and remaining English culture which gives it the fascination.

One can find it in the architecture, the food, but also within the people and the atmosphere of the city.

Hectic, noisy, exciting, that is HK with it 8 Mill. inhabitants.

After sunset, it is getting very colourful with the lights in and at the buildings and not to forget the evening fireworks. Spectacular.

Our Hotel is on Hong Kong Island and has a stunning view over Victoria Harbour towards Kowloon, that alone is already worth the trip ! Of course it is not the city alone which made us come, there are friends we would like to see again. Some of them travelled especially for a planned reunion dinner from Singapore, Tokyo and Sydney. We feel honoured and looking forward to see them all again. It is great that they made the time available and did not hesitate to put in the extra effort to travel. Many thanks.

But first comes the ' Hello again ' with the City. It seems like that the designer shops got even bigger, brighter and fancier so are the advertisements. Very glamorous.

All fits together, its part of the central district and part of HK as I know it. Strolling along Queens Road and take the escalators to the mid-levels, Hollywood Road with the antique shops, Restaurants and the Man Mo Temple. In midst the busy street a moment of calmness.

Reaching the Wellington Gallery, which belongs partially to a friend, who invited us to the vernissage. The exhibition is focussing on an artist from China with the theme ' uniforms ' and has the right headline ... dressed to kill .... Not my favourite, but very interesting how men seem to have a affinity towards women in uniform!

The gallery is specialised on art from China and has changing exhibitions of different styles.

Only a few steps away is Lan Kwai Fong, the amusement quarter of toutes jeunes & tourists. In a few days is the oct 31<sup>st</sup>, Halloween, the street is decorated with scary things like skeletons, Dracula etc. Also scary the amount of people and alcohol bottles in every niche.

It is getting dark and the vampires coming out, we meet all possible costumes and seem to be the only ones without a drink in hand.

The street goes straight downhill fenced on both sides with bars, all decorated and prepared for the great fun. The temperature is warm and everybody is on the street, how crowded can it get?

Back to the IFC shopping mall and up to the top, going outside. The Bar is well visited as it has a breathtaking view over the city and the harbour. It is another world, away from the hustle and bustle, now we have the drinks in our hands and just enjoy the views.

Let's go to a calmer place, the Hong Kong Park, in midst the office buildings lots of green, a pond and the cable-car to the peak. We relax and enjoy the Koi fishes, the flower but not the mosquitos! Escaping is essential, we find a Thai-Restaurant in the park with mosquito candles! Something good to eat and no mosquitos, no that is not the case. The mosquito want to eat as well and they prefer my blood! A short rainshower stops the insects for a moment.



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Temperature is approx. 27°C and 8 degrees warmer than in Beijing. The result, my feet did swell and I am getting tired more easily ! Please no blisters. Maybe its time to find a place to cool off, the Hotel swimming-pool is ideal! On the 6<sup>th</sup> floor outside and again with a view over the harbour towards Kowloon. Putting our feet in the water and order a cocktail, yes, that's it, life is great!

Kowloon, once upon a time it was the place with the highest population density of the world and still is the densely populated part of HK. Per statistics living 180'000 to 250'000 persons on one square kilometre in Mong Kok. Kowloon strikes us to be more Chinese with its street markets, they are so colourful with their exotic food, vegetables and stalls. We are passing dried lizards for preparing soups, innards, goat heads and well presented vegetables. Looks delicious the red apples, like polished.

Interesting also the Chinese pharmacies with their animals and plant products. We are wondering what this all is but do I want to know ?

The jade market is a good source for souvenirs, may it be a ring, necklace or Buddha, all is available and waits to be bought.

Miles further down the street our feet start to scream for a place to sit down, I believe all could hear it, this was too much walking !

We disappear into the MTR ( subway ), a cheap and fast transportation which we share with hundreds of others.

Hong Kong has changed and most likely will be different again when we come the next time. A new bridge from the airport, the new highest building, the ICC at Kowloon's harbour front. It has 116 floors and is 484 meters high, which means rang 5 in the count of the world highest buildings. 83 elevators and the highest observation deck at the 100<sup>th</sup> floor. Also the new Ritz-Carlton Hotel which occupies the top 15 floors. A fascinating architecture.

Unfortunately is the Ritz-Hotel Restaurant booked out for months otherwise it would have been a treat, so high and such a view.

We want to see more but comfortable. The 2-story tram is a good way, the price is just HK\$ 2.30 and it doesn't matter which way or how far you go. From the top deck the view is excellent towards the traffic, the small streets on the side and the sliding by buildings. Direction ' Happy Valley ', the horse race track, we hope it is a happy visit for all who place a bet. We get off at Times Square in Causeway Bay. The shopping palace is ultra modern and has everything you might want to buy and more. But just around the corner we are back in the tiny alleys and their shops. Colourful, full of people and very lively and not to forget there are plenty of cars on the street, it stinks. No wonder so many use masks.

We are walking back along the busy streets, admiring the displays in the windows and complaining about the air quality.

Hong Kong is very green, the bays and mountain region in the south provide a high contrast to the city, the quarters Aberdeen, Stanley and the New Territories seem to be on another planet, almost rural.

There is a lot to discover and see again, perhaps next time we will still find places we don't know yet. Good-bye Hong Kong, until then.

Regina Fink Blumer