

Sichuan - Four (si) Rivers (chuan)

When James read my last letter on Yunnan he filed an official complaint because I omitted the highlight of our visit to the beautiful town of Lijiang - the Tiger Leaping Gorge. Indeed, that was the highlight in that area and it deserves few words and many pictures.

The Yangtze, China's largest river, starts its way in the snow mountains, north of eastern Tibet, and does a long way across China until it empties its waters into the East China Sea in a huge delta north of Shanghai. The first major bend in its course occurs near Lijiang. That river always inspired travelers, artists, poets and others with its dramatic scenery and magnificent gorges. Three of those gorges are very famous but they will practically vanish by the year 2009 when the construction of a huge dam in that area will be complete. However, near Lijiang, many kilometers upstream from the above-mentioned gorges, there is another group of three gorges that is most scenic. The middle one among them is called "The Tiger Leaping Gorge" because, according to a legend, a tiger once leaped across the mighty river in that gorge. The gorge is phenomenal! The way down the gorge is steep and it is gorge-ous (you saw that pun coming, didn't you...): the dramatic fall of the cliffs on both sides, the trees hanging out of the cliffs in ridiculous angles, the clear blue sky, the fast moving clouds, the amazing stream, the roar of the waters that crescendoed as we came closer and closer. What can I tell you - a feast to the eyes and ears. And then, sitting just above that relentless monster that cuts so mercilessly through the earth, not being able to hear anything else except for that Wagnerian music of the water, one can only feel happy. Really, really happy (even with the knowledge that before too long one would have to drag one's beaten body all the way up). Whenever you need an hour alone, for relaxing, meditating and reflecting on life - I strongly recommend that place.

OK. Sichuan. We landed in Chengdu the capital. Ugly. A most dubious recommendation of The Lonely Planet guide. That city served us only as a base to see other places.

First came the panda reserve near Chengdu. There are many nature reserves in China in which, in theory, there are pandas in the wild. Alas, not only that you can't really find them, even they have hard time to find each other! Yuval, an Israeli traveler-photographer that we met here who prepares an article to Teva Hadvarim (the Israeli National Geographic), returned from Wolong nature reserve in which no panda was seen in over a year, and 5 months ago was the last time in which someone found panda's poop! Usually, the only signs that these elusive animals leave are their teeth marks on the bamboo branches. We, instead, went to a research reserve near Chengdu in which the pandas couldn't hide even if they really wanted to. Those animals are so cute that they are practically eatable (actually, that was one of the reasons for their dangerously low number nowadays). But that's no news. So here are the news: it turns out that apart from the giant black-n-white pandas, there are also small red pandas that look like raccoons with a beautiful thick tail, red fur and bear claws. It also turns out that the scientists are still debating whether the panda belongs to the bear or to the raccoon family (on the way back from the reserve it suddenly hit me that the word for raccoon in Hebrew is Dvimon, i.e., a little bear!). And - the greatest news is that on August 1st a female panda was born. We saw her from real close in an incubator, being handled like an Etrog of Sukkot (e.g., they make her pee by stroking her gently between her legs). A

local worker tipped us that the little cub will be brought out to the incubator in the display room at 9:30. We were standing outside the glass wall of the display room at 9:25, waiting for the "nurse" to bring the baby. We had 30 intimate seconds with her before the rumor was spread and hundreds of Chinese tourists, who minutes before left the place, came running back and crushed us.

Another attraction in the area of Chengdu is the "Grand Buddha" - the largest Buddha in the world that is carved on the side of a tall cliff.

But the highlights of Sichuan were Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong (Ji and Hu for short) - the Yosemite and Yellowstone of Sichuan. Like national parks everywhere, they are stupidly located far from everything and getting there is a long painful ordeal. But the reward is great. Ji is an exquisite park that offers spectacular clear lakes, water cascades, high peaks and trees, trees and more trees. In this season, the trees change their colors into amazing red, green, brown, purple, yellow, orange and even pink (Of-course, as James and I are both color blind, the colors could have actually been brown, orange, green, yellow, pink, red and even purple). The lakes are so pristine and pure, that each one of them served as a perfect mirror for the clear blue sky and colorful surrounding. The result is heavenly. In general, we were lucky bastards when it comes to the weather (people in the park told us that it was overcast for days until we came).

Hu, the park that we saw the next day, offers terraces of colorful ponds of water, similar to stuff that you can see in Yellowstone or in Turkey. But those ponds are set amid lush colorful forests that cover the mountains around, and with the misty clouds that engulfed the park that cold day and the pagodas in the park, you get a landscape that is somewhat otherworldly.

The park authorities in both places did a fantastic job by placing plank footpaths throughout the parks. While Hu is very small (4-5 hours and you're done), Ji is a huge park, and you can walk on those plank footpaths for days. Those footpaths are placed slightly above the ground so the disturbance to the water flow or to the little animals that reside there is reduced. And you can walk along, say, a water cascade and accompany the water as they cascade downwards, only few centimeters above. Brilliant.

But here lies the fly in the ointment (Hakotz Ba-alya). The Chinese made those parks accessible to practically everyone. In Hu, the trail goes between 3100m and 3600m above sea level. If you're not up to the task, porters will carry you on a chair that is carried by two, and even throw into the deal a blanket, as though you were the King of Siam. If that is not enough, you may also rent an oxygen tank. The result: thousands of Chinese tourists filled those two parks. In the large Ji park, we could loose those tourists by simply going deeper. But in Hu there was no escaping. The trail was simply jammed. In any given second, I have crossed at least 173 photography-lines. By "photography-line" I mean the line that connects a Chinese photographer and a Chinese photographee who poses on the background of something. Usually, the photographer and photographee will stand at least 20 meters from each other and they will both expect that the line that connects them plus the surrounding area in a radius of 40 meters will be clear of any other humans throughout the entire 5 minutes that it would take the former to take a picture of the latter. It doesn't end there. They move in herds. They are over-excited about everything. They are loud and they like to express themselves. They spit, and every spit is well calculated and practiced with much fanfare so that the

entire world will hear, see and, hopefully, admire. And they have cellular phones with the most offensive ice-cream truck tunes that actually work everywhere (the Chinese cellular coverage is comprehensive: even in the middle of the Gobi desert, the display of your cellular phone will indicate a full reception). Given all that, you may understand that we laughed bitterly when we saw that the Lonely Planet guide says that some people love "the peace and quiet" in that park.

My recommendation: Ji is a definite must, in the fall, and it deserves at least 2-3 days. I would still recommend Hu for its unique quaint beauty and since it is not too far from Ji and it is on the way from Chengdu. But that is only if you can tolerate the crowds and be amused by them rather than being annoyed.

The visit to Sichuan ended with a very pleasant encounter. In our last night in Chengdu, a 13-year old boy waited outside our hotel and when we returned from dinner he approached me and asked me if we could talk in English since he needed the practice. Hesitant at first, as I had other plans, I began talking to him standing up. After less than 2 minutes I suggested that we move to the armchairs in the garden of the hotel. We talked for almost 2 hours! I was fascinated! The boy had fantastic English and was very intelligent and articulate. I enjoyed this even more than he did. We discussed, among other things, Chinese history; namely, I asked questions and he lectured. The boy not only knew a lot about ancient and modern history of China, he even had strong personal opinions on some of the emperors! We also talked about the education system. The system is similar to ours: 12 grades, 6 in primary school, 3 in junior-high and 3 in high-school. There are 60 students in his class and near 400 students in his grade in school. When I asked him how come that no other Chinese youngster seem to speak even one word of English, despite the fact that it is mandatory in high-school, I could see that he is a bit uncomfortable. He suggested that they might be a bit shy or unconfident. When I asked him whether his parents were not worried for him (it was almost 11PM), it turned out that they were sitting near another table in the garden, in complete silence and in the dark, in order to reduce their presence to a minimum! They were a medical doctor and an accountant and they probably dedicate most of their evenings for the sake of their only son (he met many tourists this way, many of which were Israelis). We invited them over and continued our conversation, where both James and Bill (the kid) served as translators. That evening left a lasting impression on me, even though I knew that Bill and his parents do not represent anything but themselves.

Next: Xian and Beijing, the two last stops.

Tamir