

Tim and Marci's Tips and Tactics for Travel To and Around China

I am a little shocked that the World Biomaterials Congress is only a few weeks (days actually!) away. Yesterday or so, it seemed like there was plenty of preparation time; now, not so much. Since we will be leaving soon, I thought I would share some of my experiences from previous trips I've made to China and Chengdu, specifically some travel tips that I've found to be successful (mostly by trial and error). Some of my colleagues are already seasoned long-distance travelers, have considerable experience in China, will thus have their own preferred MO's, and may not need to read further; I'm gearing this note for those who have never or rarely been so far abroad, and have little experience with China beyond the local Chinese Restaurant. I've included some info on packing, the flight, money, water, tours, food, bathrooms, things unique to china, and things to see. Thus, this disclaimer – I'm basing these writings on my experiences during my most recent trip (last year), which did not include Chengdu, and previous trips over the past 10 years, which did include Chengdu. There are likely to be variations and inconsistencies between others' preferences and my personal experiences, so use this as a general guideline, not a peer reviewed paper for JBMR. Other web-based sources, travel agents, etc., can be consulted for specific information. I kept pointing out to Dan and Anthony that the SFB should have sent me on research trips to Chengdu, so if something is not completely accurate, it's their fault.

0. PACKING AND USEFUL THINGS TO BRING:

OK, I admit it – I usually do not travel light. The currently available, easily rolling bags allow me to pack everything I want (not necessarily just need) for a long trip. But that's my preference. I like the workout. The luggage weight limits are fairly generous (see below). Whether you pack "heavy" or "light" I've noted a few things that may help along the way. Here are a few items I've found invaluable:

- 1) Plastic shoe/sweater boxes: I like to incorporate those plastic shoe or sweater boxes available at Wal-Mart, etc. for a dollar or two each into my luggage. They're not heavy, and they help me organize items (toiletries, electronics, etc), and provide some additional protection. They're also great for protecting new souvenirs on the way home. Marci (my wife) and I don't always agree on how to implement this (I tend to overdo it), but if you're travelling to multiple hotels in multiple cities, it makes packing/unpacking easier.
- 2) Plastic bags – especially zip-lock type sandwich/storage bags. Having an assortment of sizes can make organization/storage of small items easy. Include a few in carry-on luggage.
- 3) A roll of duct tape – useful for all sorts of repairs, you never know when you'll need it.
- 4) Small first aid items like band aids, creams, etc., hand sanitizer, and a roll or two of toilet paper (more on that later). For carry-on, I've found the foil wrapped hand sanitizing wipes to be useful. Also a small package of general cleaning wipes (i.e., baby wipes) are worth taking.
- 5) Rubber bands: Pack a handful of assorted size rubber bands in one of your zip-lock bags (see, it's useful already).
- 6) Small LED flashlight (and an extra battery).
- 7) Your own headphones for the flights (at least 2 sets). Those provided by the airlines are not comfortable.
- 8) A small pocket knife (e.g., Swiss army knife) and/or a small universal tool set (i.e., with exchangeable screwdriver heads). This, of course, will need to be in checked baggage.

9) Power and outlet converter – In China, there are two types of outlets, one with 2 round parallel prongs, and another with 3 prongs. Many electronics (computers, phones, etc) come with their own transformer (that bulky box in the middle of the power cord), and you need only an adapter to convert the plug from parallel flat to round. A kit from Target or Wal-Mart will usually have what you need. Some hotels will have a limited number of converters, but with so many US travelers, these might not be available.

10) Outlet strip (for charging/using multiple items in a room).

11) A three-to-two prong adapter. The outlet strip (#10, above) will have a 3 prong plug, and the 3-to-2 adapter will be necessary. Pack two.

12) Extra batteries. All sizes of batteries are available anywhere in China. However, they may not be exactly where you are when a battery-powered device needs new power (like on the flight). Pack an extra set or two for any battery-powered devices.

13) Digital photo storage. Again, this is available anywhere in China; however, having an extra SD card when you need it is worth packing one or two.

14) Passport pouch or carrier.

15) Xerox and/or digital copies of your passport photo page, and your Chinese visa.

16) A small knapsack that will fold and fit in checked baggage, and/or a small duffle bag, also folded to fit into checked luggage. Very handy, lightweight, and low volume. You never know when you'll need it

17) Pocket Chinese phrase book. A small phrase book can be useful for communicating everyday things in China. The beauty of the book is that when you try to use the phonetic pronunciation key, unless you have studied the 4 tones of the Chinese language, you will get it wrong and amuse the people around you. You can then point to the phrase in the book, and again witness the amusement of your new friends as they realize what you meant to ask or say. Even if you learn to properly pronounce the phrase in Chengdu, when you go to a different city, the dialect will be different, and you will still need to point in the book.

18) Cell phones. It may be worth it to bring your phone with you, or not. You should check with your wireless provider to find out if your cell phone will work in an international network or will accept a SIM card (which makes your phone think that it's at home in China). Even if your phone does work, you may find that you are constantly roaming. There are many phone stores in China, and they will probably be able to tell you if your phone can be made to work in China. An inexpensive and easy way to call (if not receive) home is to buy a calling card – NOTE: Many calling cards are connected to a local network, and so a card that you buy in Beijing or Shanghai may not work in Chengdu. Another solution is to rent a phone while in China. There are several companies that will help you with rentals. A friend put us on to this – the companies will deliver your rental phone to your hotel; and if you are traveling in China, they will even pick up the phone at your hotel in the city from which you depart. It sounds pretty good. I have no endorsements here, but our friend is using <http://www.china-mobile-phones.com/>. There's also <http://www.pandaphone.com/> (why not, since Sichuan is home to most of the world's pandas).

19) Gifts. Exchanging gifts is an old and common Chinese tradition. If you are meeting a Chinese person in China, it is appropriate to exchange small gifts. Something from your organization is nice. That way your new friend will remember you each time he or she wears your university's ball cap. Focus on small, easily packed, and non-breakable items. The nice thing about gifts is that when they're given, they open space in your luggage - which you'll need for the new gifts you've just received. It's a good idea to have some spare small gifts, since you may have opportunities to meet people that you've not anticipated.

O.A: Medications & Toiletries: Some of the same OTC meds and toiletries that are available in the US are also available in China, especially in a city like Chengdu. That said, it's not always certain *where* they will be available, or if you will be able to identify them. Hotel convenience shops, typical in larger US hotels, may not exist. Outside convenience shops, like 7-11's, may be close to the hotel, and may or may not have what you want; however, they generally carry some US or European items. Large department stores will generally have a wide variety of OTC and shower/toiletry items, but may be removed a bit from the hotel. In general, I would recommend that you pack *any* OTC medications that you might *even remotely think* you might need. A not-exhaustive list includes: allergy-such as Claritin or Benadryl; Pepto-bismol, imodium or similar GI-; aches and pain- (acetaminophen, ibuprofen, etc) meds; antibiotic and hydrocortisone creams.

O.B: Prescription meds are a different story. I've never tried to get prescription medications in China because I always try to be prepared. I would plan for unavailability in China. Therefore, bring plenty of any prescription drugs that you need (they're items to over-pack). I usually take at least 2 complete sets of prescription meds (complete set = enough to last the length of the entire trip, with a few extra for contingencies like missed or delayed flights/connections). Pack one set in carry on, and pack the second set in checked luggage. If you want to be extra cautious, pack a third set in a friend's luggage. Don't forget your epi pen or inhalers if you have allergies or asthma, even if you rarely need them.

Note that the CDC travel website (<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/china.htm>) is an excellent resource to help you determine how sick you might get in China.

O.C: Toiletries and Bath items: Hotels in China always provide shampoo, conditioner, hand/moisturizing cream, as in the US. But in China, most hotels also include: a comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, razor (but not shaving cream), slippers, and bathrobes. You can keep anything but the bathrobes (in fact, they'll sell you bathrobes, towels, cloth laundry bags, etc, as souvenirs; I'm especially fond of the laundry bags....). They're also very generous with replacing the consumable items. If, say, you have a favorite shampoo, conditioner, etc., by all means bring it along – one of the most fun parts about prepping for a trip is checking out the “travel size” sections of local stores. The hotel room will usually be equipped with a hair dryer, iron, ironing board, as in US hotels, or they will be available upon request. That little string attached to the shower is actually a line for drying clothes.

One caution: before you are allowed to check out, the hotel will send someone to your room to perform an inventory on non-consumable items. OK, I know what you're thinking (towels, anyone?), and I'm not talking about that. Just keep track of your room's inventory. The point is that if, at any time, you use a cloth laundry bag, or the cleaning staff takes a bathrobe with the towels, make sure that they bring you a new one, or you will be charged at checkout for the missing item. Once, we gave something small (like a clock or soap dish) to a friend in another room because they didn't have one, and it took the staff 20 minutes to track everything down, delaying our checkout. Another time they were going to charge us for an alarm clock, even though we told them when we checked-in there was none in the room, and would they please bring us one (which they never did).

Hotel keys are also inventoried. In the US, those credit-card sized keys are treated as consumables, but in China, you will be charged for a missing key. Sometimes it's worth the small deposit for an interesting travel souvenir.

Finally, let's talk about clothes. What you pack depends on how long you'll be travelling. The weather in Chengdu in June will be typical of weather in most of the US in June, which means it could be hot, warm, or cool (probably not cold, and more on the hot/warm side). As of now, the temperature is about the same as in Baltimore, i.e., warm and pleasant. Check out the weather on your favorite weather app. Your hotel will have a laundry service available; typically an itemized list for cleaning is available in your room. Expect to pay comparable prices for similar services in US hotels. As far as what to bring, face it, I'm no fashion maven, so basically, you're on your own there. I do have one bit of advice that was given to us years ago, and that we still follow when going to China. Since clothing in China is reasonably priced, and silk is a fabric of choice - you can have suits, shirts, dresses, etc. tailor made for a fraction of the price in the US – it's not difficult to bring a new wardrobe home. So,

to make room for new stuff, you can 1) buy an inexpensive, but decent, new suitcase in China, and/or 2) pack disposable clothing, i.e., clothes that you can jettison in China to make room for the new. It's a good time to finally get rid of those items in the closet that you've been saying "I think I can wear this one more time." Now is that time.

Since lost/delayed luggage is a fact of travel, treat packed items like an investment portfolio: diversify. If you have 2 checked bags, pack complete outfits in each (i.e., don't confine socks to one bag). That way, if a bag is lost or delayed, then you still have enough clothes to get by. If you are travelling with companions, divide, mix and match between your suitcases. That way, everyone will have enough clothes to last a day or two when you arrive in China, and who knows, maybe you're friend's clothes will fit better, or you'll like them more than your own. Pack one outfit in the carryon, and maybe a sweater. One trip, we arrived in Beijing and the suitcase with my wife's clothes was delayed a whole day, which turned out to be the one cold/cool day of the trip. The plane can also be chilly.

Luggage Allowances: For international travel to China, each passenger will usually be allowed to check 2 bags @50lbs each. For flights within China, each passenger is allowed one bag @44lbs. If you are checking bags through to Chengdu, even though you are making a connection in another airport, you are still allowed the 2x50lbs. of luggage. If you are staying in one city and then flying to another, it is a domestic flight, and the 44lbs rule applies. Don't worry, though. If your bag is over 44lbs, you will need to pay a small overage fee, which doesn't amount to much. The process is: 1) you will check in as you would in any US airport, and your baggage will be weighed, 2) if you are over the limit, you will be given a ticket, and you must go to a different line to pay the fee, 3) then you will return to the check in counter, show the receipt for the over-the-limit luggage, and continue to check in. If you have travelling companions, usually only one person need go to pay the fee, the rest can stay at the counter with the luggage.

I. THE FLIGHT: is long. I mean really long. There's no way to get around it. Some of the US-to-China flights are the longest non-stop flights in the world. It starts with getting to the airport at least 2-3 hours in advance (for an international flight). And we're eventually going to be taking an equally long return flight, so it's not a bad idea to plan for the time in the air.

Some of you may be looking forward to a long stay in one seat to get some real work done, but not me. If work is not for you on the plane, there are a number of ways to pass the time. For example, sleeping, at least part of the way. Remember that China is 12 hours ahead of Eastern Time (oh, and note that you will cross the International Date Line on the way over, so you will lose a calendar day during your flight. You'll make it up on the way back; depending on where you are flying, you may come back before you leave!). Therefore, if your flight leaves at 2PM EDT, it is 2AM in China (also note that China has only 1 time zone for the entire country! even though there should be about 5 time zones. It's called CST - China Standard Time - and it is based on Beijing Time). If you choose to stay up for the entire flight, it's like pulling an all-nighter - which is fine for a student, but not so enjoyable for me nowadays. However, I can vouch that you can catch up on a lot of movies during a 13 hour flight. So be prepared for some jet lag, is what I'm saying. Also, bring your own headphones; you can pick up some inexpensive, but comfortable and serviceable headphones at a local drug-store. I bring several sets, since I've noticed that something will always happen to at least one set of headphones. If you lose your headphones, or leave them on the plane, you can buy more for the trip home in China.

Your flight will likely have 3-4 meals, and they might all be breakfast, depending on your flight schedule. You will notice that the meals will start out with Western-style (US) food, and as you get closer to China, transition to Chinese-style food. We'll talk about food later, but for now remember that neither the Chinese food on the airplane nor your local Chinese restaurant represents the food you will experience in China, and especially Chengdu.

I like to have a small assortment of snacks in carry-on luggage. Although you can generally walk back to the galley and grab something, you never know what will be available on the flight. Good snacks can also make a reasonable offering to the person next to you to put them in your debt, thus rendering them willing to turn off their reading light, etc. when you ask.

Drink plenty of water on the flight. The flight attendants are active the entire flight, somewhere on the plane, and I've found that they don't mind if you walk back to one of the galleys and ask for something to drink or a snack. When the lights go down, the galleys are also a great place to peek out the window at your location without disturbing your neighbors. If you get a chance, and the weather and time of day cooperate, the mountains of Kamchatka (Russia) are worth a look.

Get up and stretch/walk around. On one of my flights to China, the Entertainment Center (a small LCD screen on the seat back in front of you) actually had a sort-of in-flight calisthenics channel, with exercises that you could do in your seat. Ankle stretches, knee flexes, etc. are useful. Last year, I still had a relatively new hip, and I needed to get out of my seat every 2 hours or so to stretch and walk around. It helps to prevent blood clots. I definitely recommend it.

Not long before you finally land, the flight attendants will bring some entry documents for you to fill out. Don't panic. It is not necessary to finish the form on the flight. There will be plenty of time, and an area within the airport complete with the same forms, to fill it out.

Chinese Airports: Chances are that you are flying into either: 1) Beijing, 2) Shanghai, 3) Hong Kong, or 4) Guangzhou (Canton) to make a connection to Chengdu. The international sections of the airports are all incredibly modern and pleasant, especially Beijing, where huge renovations and additions were made for the 2008 Olympics. Further chances are that you may need to move to a domestic terminal to meet the connection to your next destination. The signs are usually quite obvious, and are sometimes in English as well as Chinese, but it's a good idea to ask your airline's reps how to find your next flight.



Photo by Tim & Marci

The Chinese airports will have a wide variety of food options (including Starbucks and McDonald's) if you have time for a snack before your connection departs. You can also take advantage of the time to change some currency (either through one of the currency exchange stations, or at an ATM – more on that later). The airport currency exchanges won't be the best rate, so don't go all-in.

It will likely take at least 20-30 minutes to clear customs/immigration. This is not because the customs part takes a long time, but because there will be many people arriving at about the same time, and they will all be in the same line as you. You will note that there will be separate lines for Chinese citizens and visitors. If an official in a uniform instructs you to go to a line marked for Chinese citizens, go, because it means they're opening another few booths to help move the non-citizens through. If you are making a connection, you may or may not be

required to fetch your luggage, go through customs, and put it back on a luggage belt. There are usually plenty of luggage carts available to help move your luggage.

Departure Fees? In the past, each time one flew out of a Chinese airport, a “departure fee” was required. In cash. In Chinese cash. So travelers learned to keep 50-100 Yuan (see below) in their pocket for this fee. Last year, we were told that the fees no longer existed; but I kept the cash on hand anyway – and never used it (Beijing, Xi’an, Shanghai). I probably also didn’t use it to pay departure fees on my previous trip, but forgot. The fees were abolished (or hidden) prior to the 2008 Olympics, I believe, possibly to encourage travel. It used to be that we would need to pay the tax at a designated desk, but no more. If you look at a travel web site, and it talks about the departure tax, it’s probably old. I just looked at a web site from a Canadian Chinese Tour site, and it was copyright 2002 – at that time we did pay the departure tax. NO MORE. ALL TAXES ARE INCLUDED IN THE TICKET PRICE (AS IN THE US). But I’m still going to keep some cash in my pocket. Old habits die hard.

II. CASH OR CREDIT?: are equally good in most places in China. The question is, how best to make sure you can pay for the things you need to pay for once you are there?

1) The Money: Chinese currency is the RMB or Yuan (¥); in many places, the colloquial is “kwai” (like “buck”) . The current exchange rate is about ¥6.32 to the dollar, or about \$0.16 to the yuan. The largest bills available in China are ¥100 notes, the equivalent of about \$15.81 US. So, your wallet will tend to get a little thick. The currency also comes in ¥50, ¥20, ¥5, ¥2 and ¥1 notes. **In addition, and beware of this, there are smaller bills** called “jiao:” 5 Jiao equals ½ Yuan (like 50 cents), 2 Jiao is 20 cents, and 1 jiao is 10 cents. If you are using cash and getting change, make sure that someone doesn’t try to slip in jiao notes instead of yuan! There are also assorted coins from 1 yuan to 1 fen (1 fen is like a penny).

2) Credit cards: Most places will take credit cards, even McDonald’s. Generally, the card will be charged in RMB (¥), and your bank will make the conversion. There may or may not be a per-transaction charge for the foreign transaction. Call your credit card company to find out their policy on foreign transactions. If you’re lucky, you may have a card that does not charge.

Also note, I call my credit card companies and tell them that I’m going to be in China, and give them the dates I’ll be away. That way, they won’t put a hold on your credit card when “unusual transactions” from Beijing or Chengdu appear.

3) ATM’s: ATM’s are now plentiful, and there are many banks in China. In addition to the usual ATM fees that we are used to in the US, your bank may also have a currency exchange fee. Some ATM’s may not have an English language option. The general layout and operating procedure are pretty much the same as in the US. If you want the challenge of performing a cash withdrawal in Chinese, make sure you are using an ATM at a bank near your hotel, in case the machine decides to keep your card, and you need to retrieve it the next day.

4) Traveler’s Checks: If you can find them, TC’s are still accepted at most banks and in hotel lobbies, but some exchange venues may not be familiar with them. I’ve read some posts where folks were not successful with TC’s; in the past, I’ve not had any problems with Traveler’s Checks, but I find ATM’s easier.

5) Exchanging US for RMB: It is pretty easy to exchange US dollars for Chinese RMB at either banks or your hotel lobby (as it is for Travelers Checks). Either will give you the official exchange rate, but there will be a fee for the exchange. It’s usually a few percent (e.g., 2%) of the total exchange. Also, sometimes the bank’s exchange

process will take quite a bit of time, so the hotel desk is the better choice. Whenever you exchange money, you will need your passport, but you are carrying that with you at all times anyway (right?). NOTE: NEVER exchange any money “on the street,” i.e., from any source other than your hotel, bank or official currency exchange (see “exchange rates for posting Chinese bail.....”).

6) Cash: Cash is welcome (and sometimes necessary) in smaller stores, street markets, etc. However, don't go around opening your wallet for small purchases “on the street.” Keep a roll of small bills in a pocket or purse or passport carrier, separate from your wallet/main cash. There are many pickpockets who specialize in targeting foreign tourists.

7) Bargaining: This is one of the most enjoyable parts of being a tourist in China. While it would be inappropriate to bargain for, say, the registration price of the World Congress, in many places haggling is expected and part of the fun. Just don't try it in “western” style department stores, book stores supermarkets, pharmacies, or 7-11-type convenience stores. The open food market, flea market, souvenir store, etc. are fair game. A useful phrase to use when bargaining is: “tai gui le,” pronounced “tie gway luh”, meaning “it is too expensive.”

III. WATER: DON'T DRINK IT! if it comes out of a tap or drinking fountain, etc. Bottled (and therefore drinkable) water is cheap and available everywhere. For example, your hotel room will likely provide you with one or two bottles of water each day. Your hotel room will also have an electric pot to boil water, and thus render it drinkable. I was in the habit of boiling a pot of water each night to have cool water available in the morning. I must admit that I've used tap water to brush my teeth, and not had any adverse reactions. Granted, it's never been a controlled experiment. It is not much of an inconvenience to use bottled or the previously boiled water to brush teeth. Avoiding the tap water, however, can go to extremes. There was one family we knew of on one of our adoption trips where the Mom and daughter put duct tape (I'm not kidding here) over their mouths in the shower to prevent accidental ingestion. I ask you.

In addition to avoiding tap water directly, it is probably best to avoid anything that may come in contact with tap water – for example fruits and vegetables may be washed with local tap water. It is safest to eat only foods that are peeled or peelable (oranges, bananas, etc). I know that I've eaten lettuce from a salad bar, indeed lots of items from salad bars, without any ill effects, but it's best to be safe.

Avoid ice at all costs, especially if you don't know the source! Some restaurants will advertise that their ice is made from bottled water. Good. Others won't say, and thus avoid the ice. Actually, in general, ice isn't as common in China as it is in the US, except in the US-based fast food restaurants. Learn to say “bu bing” (phonetically: boo beeng) meaning, “no ice.”

Beverages During Meals at Restaurants: If you are on a programmed tour, like a trip to the Panda Research Center, it will seem that Coke scooped a contract early-on in China. You will usually be offered one glass of Coke, Sprite, rarely Diet Coke (called “Coke Light”), beer, or water (sometimes sparkling water, like Perrier). Of course, as in the US, hot tea is almost always also available (and since it's been boiled, drinkable). Sometimes asking for another glass of Diet Coke gets you a blank or confused stare, like “do you really drink two glasses on your planet?” So, I've learned to ask right away to buy an entire bottle (usually 1 liter) or two for the table. The first thing you will be told is “it's not included with your meal.” To which you answer, “yes, and so I will pay for this.” Sometimes, additional beverages are like a separate concession in the Restaurant, and you will need to walk over

to the “bar” and make the purchase there. More on Restaurants later, but recognize that during any organized tour, your restaurant stop is part of a government approved (and often prescribed) tour plan.

IV. TOUR TO THE (SILK, LACQUER FURNITURE, JADE, CLOISSONE, SILK RUG, TERRA COTTA WARRIOR, ETC.) FACTORY: is essentially an infomercial. These tours are often “tag-ons” to the greater tour of the Museum, Great Wall (Beijing), Terra Cotta Warriors (Xi’an), etc. The tours are often associated with a lunch stop. Like the restaurants previously mentioned, they are required by the government as part of your tour, and state-run. Your program will begin with an often informative and interesting demo tour of the product’s history and how it is made (using traditional methods), which is actually quite interesting.

After the tour, prepare to be hit with the hard sell for the product in question! As soon as you look at, and certainly if you pick up, one of the objects (a piece of jade, say), a sales person (usually an enthusiastic young woman) will cheerfully inform you that she will be happy to take the item and prepare your purchase. “No thank you,” “I don’t want it” or “bu yao” (phonetically: boo yow, which means “don’t want”) will usually get the idea across. Sometimes an “oh, there’s Tim, I need to talk to him,” and a quick get-away is the only recourse. (But Tim will probably be shopping). (I think Marci snuck that one in on me). The sales staff are on commission, and are relentless. Note that the sales personnel usually speak quite good English. If you pick up a product and a sales person asks you “do you like this?” they are not asking for your aesthetic appraisal. “Do you like this” is code for “you want to buy this, right?” Answering “yes” will take you back to the offer to prepare the item for your purchase. My favorite exchanges have been when looking at an expensive item (e.g., a rug costing several \$1,000’s US), telling the sales person, “yes I like it, but it is too expensive for me,” and having her reply “but if you really love this, then the cost does not matter.” I use what my daughters call “the look,” and then smile and say, “no thank you.”

On the other hand, if you do want to make a purchase and bring something home, from rugs to furniture to life-sized replicas of Terra Cotta Warriors, the staff will cheerfully package for transport, or arrange to ship, etc. I’ve had some luck with this. Things I’ve bought and had shipped actually arrived. And in one piece.

Will your guide help you? Sometimes. In some places, there is no bargaining to be had (the silk factories are notorious for non-bargaining). Your guides may know that the prices won’t go any lower. Your guide may be helpful or completely passive about bargaining.

V. FOOD: has to be experienced! Sichuan (i.e., Chengdu) is famous for many things, and top among those is SPICY FOOD. “Spicy” has a completely different meaning in China than in the US. Hot, spicy food in Chengdu is really hot – I mean killer hot. It is most definitely worth trying, but be prepared – tea usually helps in the aftermath. And definitely try food with “Sichuan pepper;” it’s not exactly hot, like jalapeno peppers, it’s more like having a gentle firework slowly explode in your mouth. I’ve never found anything like it anywhere else. Each time I’ve been to Chengdu, my colleague’s parents give me a bag of the peppercorns to take back to her in the US (and she, in turn brings me some when she visits her parents in Chengdu).



Photo by Tim & Marci

Don’t worry about what to order, especially during a programmed tour. Generally, you’ll sit at a large round table, with a large round lazy-susan in the center. The waiters will then begin to bring the food, and then more food, and then continue to bring some food. There will be anywhere from 5-20 different choices at the table. Try

then all, except the bits that seem to be looking back at you. The trick is to grab the serving disk from the lazy-susan, rather than to stop it from spinning, and replacing the dish as an open spot comes by again. Stopping the rounds may annoy your dining companions. Soup may be served as a last, as well as a first, course, and generally oranges are served as an afterward.

Another specialty dining experience in Chengdu is “Hot Pot” (which is not like the pottery painting franchises here in the US). At a Hot Pot restaurant, each table or section will have a boiling pot (the Hot Pot) of broth in the center. The restaurant will have a smorgasbord-type of layout with different meats, veggies, etc. Choose what you like, and drop it into the Hot Pot to cook. Fish it out and there’s dinner or lunch. I didn’t realize that so many different species of squid were available for dinner until I saw them laid out at a Hot Pot restaurant in Chengdu.

Oh, there might be two sides to your hot pot – the light broth (like chicken soup), and the (spicy) hot side, filled with liquid that looks not too long out of the volcano.

Note: I would not recommend eating street food at the night market, no matter how appetizing those insects-on-a-stick may look. Not even on a dare.

An additional note on Western Food: McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Burger King, KFC, Starbucks, etc. all have a presence in Chengdu, and are surprisingly similar to their US counterparts. There may or may not be an English-speaking employee available to take your order. Not to worry – the western restaurants will have an English language picture menu to allow you to “point to order” (they may have it behind the counter). Prices are similar to those in the US, though usually slightly less. That makes going to, say, McD’s a treat for many locals, considering that a generous dinner at a local restaurant, with all the rice you care to eat, is about the same price as a cheeseburger, fries and soda (remember to order that without ice: “bu bing”). Also, the McD’s Happy Meals come with Chinese versions of the toys (not found in the US), if you happen to know a collector.

In summary, Sichuan offers a unique cuisine, and the finest restaurants in town are reasonably priced. There are several “walking malls,” or “restaurant rows” with outstanding food venues. Just remember the “hot” part.

VI. YES YOU CAN! I know that this is a delicate topic, but in the US we tend to take our chair-height toilets for granted. Travel in China will help you develop a new respect for the universal availability of this convenience. In China, you are likely to run into two types of toilets, the “western” chair-height toilet, and the Chinese standard “squat toilet.” The name is self-descriptive, and pretty much what you would expect: a hole in the ground with no seat, and potentially no other means of support. At first, it may seem impossible to use, but necessity will spur your creativity. Yes, you can use a squat toilet, even 3 months post-op from a total-hip replacement. Trust me on this. Fortunately, hotel rooms, convention centers, museums, Forbidden Cities, and many restaurants will have “western toilets.” More traditional venues may not. I just wanted you to be prepared.



Photo by Audrey

Oh, and even when a western toilet is available, it’s often useful to have your own toilet paper (as mentioned above) and hand sanitizer, which can double as seat sanitizer. Toilet paper may not always be available. Some bathrooms have the toilet paper in the common area, before you enter the stall, so look around.

VII. OTHER INTERESTING THINGS YOU ARE LIKELY TO SEE OR EXPERIENCE IN CHINA THAT ARE NOT COMMON IN THE US: Some contemporary Chinese customs can be traced back hundreds, if not

thousands, of years. There are practices in China that we just don't have in the US. Some of the more interesting may take you by surprise the first few times you encounter them.

1) Bicycles: OK, sure we have bikes in the US; however, in Chengdu, you are likely to see someone on a bicycle carrying several mattresses (yes, several), piles of hay or trash bags, or furniture. Some more modern delivery people use motorized scooters (we saw a nearly life-sized terra-cotta warrior replica being delivered on a small scooter).

2) Beasts-of-Burden: Chengdu is a modern city by any standard. However, if you venture outside the city, farmers and their water buffalo are common. Sometimes, the farmers will bring their water buffalo into the city, carrying crops, etc. It is changing, but you may be lucky to see ox- or buffalo- or donkey-drawn carts. Maybe not in center city, but they'll be around. We saw one going through a toll plaza. I think the water buffalo are especially picturesque.

3) Split pants: While the "western" practice of using diapers for infants and toddlers does have its followers in China, it isn't unusual to see infants and toddlers wearing "split pants." The name is self-descriptive. The pants are split in the crotch so that the child need not wear a diaper, but can squat wherever and whenever the need arises. Parents are usually discreet where their child squats, but don't be surprised to be flashed by a bottom or two if you see small children out and about.

4) Ear Cleaning: In parks and around tea-houses, you may be approached by someone offering to clean your ears. It's not hard to say "no thank you," once you see the implements proposed for the cleaning.

5) Smoking: Smoking (cigarettes) has nearly disappeared from public view in the US. Not so in China. Smoking is allowed in many public places, including many restaurants. If you are used to a smoke-free environment, be prepared to experience cigarette smoke again.

6) Tibetan Monks: Chengdu is the main departure city for anyone going to Tibet (in fact, you can jump into a tour group and go for an overnight in Lhasa if you'd like). Therefore, it is also the arrival city for people coming from Tibet. In addition, there are several prominent Buddhist monasteries in and around Chengdu. So, you are likely to see Buddhist monks in their traditional saffron robes almost anywhere. Those from Tibet may be tourists like you and me. I always enjoy seeing a traditional monk talking on a cell phone or taking a digital photo. They may want to take a photo with you (I know I'm in several Tibetan photo albums). I've never met a monk in China that I didn't like.

7) The color red: Red is considered a highly auspicious color in China ("auspicious" is also the preferred translation of any word meaning lucky or fortunate; you'll likely hear it often). The deep meanings of red predate communism. Red is found everywhere. There is a belief that when people have a relationship, they are connected by a mystical red thread. If you are bringing gifts, red bags, wrapping paper, or envelopes are quite appropriate.

8) Pandas: You are going to be in Panda Central! Most of the world's pandas live in Sichuan province (with a few wandering in neighboring provinces). With only about 1,000 pandas in the wild, chances are not good of seeing one roaming about; however, our hosts at the WBC have arranged a tour of the Chengdu Panda Research Center. There is another Panda Research Center, located in the outback



Photo by Tim & Marci

of Sichuan – it’s quite an adventure getting there – and you may think it’s more authentic, being right in the mountains where the pandas live. Not so; the Chengdu facility is an excellent bet. The research center is in a lovely park setting, and is an all-around pleasant place to visit. In Chengdu, they’re not jumping on the Panda Bandwagon, they *are* the Bandwagon, Conductor, and Composer. You will likely see more pandas in that one place than you will in all the zoos you will visit throughout your life. Don’t ignore the smaller red pandas. They don’t get the press, but they’re quite endearing. Given that, you’ll understand the reason for the panda graphics all over the place. But in Panda Central, why not?

9) Dragons: Dragons are my personal favorite Chinese icon. There is an outstanding dragon mythology in China. Enough said. You’ll see for yourself.

10) Purple Jade: A type of stone, with alternating purple and green strata, is unique to the area, and is called “purple jade.” Throughout China, carvings of anything you can imagine are available; however, the purple jade is found only in Sichuan, around Chengdu. If you are interested in any small carved items for souvenirs or gifts, something made of purple jade (how ‘bout a dragon?) is the ticket.

VIII. THINGS TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT: China is a wonderful place full of friendly wonderful people. I enjoy amusing Chinese natives with my poor Chinese language skills. I have been amazed at how helpful people will be when you don’t speak Chinese (and they don’t speak English). However, there are a few tidbits that may help you avoid problems when out and about.

1) Always carry your passport, and protect it as if it were a Stradivarius violin. That is, use a passport pouch, don’t leave it lying around on a table, and wear the pouch around your neck. It’s not necessarily fashionable, but it’s safe.

2) Protect your money, credit cards, etc. as if they were a Guarneri violin. A money belt can be a good idea.

3) Art Students: This is a favorite “scam” on the city streets. A pair of young students may approach you to “practice their English,” and then ask you to come see their art work. It’s probably not a good idea to go with them (although we once fell for it and survived). On the other hand, many legitimate students may approach you and just want to chat. I’ve always enjoyed speaking to the people I’ve met by chance on the street. Once, my father was invited to visit an English Language school. A few hours later, I realized that I didn’t know where he was, or how to contact him. I was going to say that we still look for him now and again, when we return to China; but it turned out to be a legitimate visit, and one of his favorite experiences in China.

4) Having light/blond hair: If you have light colored hair, you may be asked to pose for a photo op with new Chinese friends. I’ve never known this to be a problem or scam; it’s just that most people in China have dark hair, and light hair is a novelty. It’s OK to politely refuse and walk away - just don’t look back at the disappointment in their faces. But come on, being like Brad or Angelina for a few minutes can be fun!

IX. IF YOU CAN ONLY VISIT ONE TOURIST SITE DURING YOUR STAY IN CHENGDU

I would recommend:

1) For indoor museum/archeology lovers: *Sanxingdui* – the remnants of a remarkable culture dating from over 3,500 years ago. This is a culture that predates King Tut by about 300



Photo by Tim & Marci

years, and depending on the historical reckoning, was roughly contemporary with (or predated) Moses. The museum is fairly new (it opened in 1997) because the discovery of the Sanxingdui culture is also fairly new (1987). It's about 20 or so miles outside of Chengdu. If you like *old*, and can't get to Xi'an to see the Terra Cotta Warriors, this is the place to go.

2) For outside/cultural: either a) the *Great Buddha at LeShan* or b) *Dujiangyan, the "water project"*. The Great Buddha is a bit further out (more than an hour drive) than Dujiangyan, which is about 30 miles from Chengdu.

A) The Great Buddha is the largest carving of Buddha in the world, carved in the face of a cliff. The carving began in 713 AD. Reaching the Buddha (though not necessarily enlightenment) requires a walk from the park entrance to the top (head), from where you can look down at the entire sculpture. It is truly worth the walk down the steps, also carved on the side of the cliff, to stand by the feet and look back up at the head. Of course, you'll have to walk back up again – so consider that before heading down. You can also take a river cruise to get another view of this remarkable sight.



Photo by Tim & Marci

B) The Water Project (or irrigation system) in Dujiangyan was engineered to tame the Min river over 2,000 years ago, and is still working (although I've been assured that the bamboo suspension bridge has been replaced and reinforced with hidden steel cables). Once the local citizens were sure that the weir system worked as planned (several hundred years later), they rededicated the Two Kings Temple, on the hill overlooking the project, to the engineer who built the water



Photo by Tim & Marci

project – I seem to remember that he also invented the recipe for kung pao chicken. It's worth going just to verify that. I recommend starting at the top of the monastery and walking *down* to the water. For some reason, on my first two trips there, I was interviewed, and my family and I were filmed and featured on Chinese TV. I never saw either of the reports. Also, be careful at the ticket booth; twice I've severely banged my head on a low hanging eave near the entrance. It's the little things we remember.

3. Of course, the Pandas (see above) – you know by now that a tour of the Panda Research Center is offered as part of the meeting and well worth seeing. I was talking about *other than the Panda Research Center* in this section.....

4. Chengdu has many other unique offerings on a smaller scale as well, including the cottage of the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu, tea houses, an incredible vegetarian restaurant at the Wenshu Monastery, and Sichuan Opera.



Photo by Tim & Marci

Sichuan Opera is its own tradition and is different from Beijing Opera. Sichuan Opera features the unique skill of quick mask changing. This may be something to look up on YouTube, because it's not easily described. A good film about the region is "The King of Masks." I will tell you now (spoiler alert), despite truly heartbreaking moments, the film ends well, and shows some of the traditions of the region.

And finally, get out and about! Chinese grocery and department stores are so different from those in the US, and just fun to experience. Last year in Beijing, our favorite was the local “Wu-Mart.” I’m not sure what’s near our venue, but it is absolutely worth it to be adventurous and experience part of daily life in China. The stores are a bit different than in the US. Many larger shops work a little like a collection of co-ops. Instead of centralized check-out, they will ask you to pay for stationary in the stationary section, batteries in the battery section, etc. You don’t just fill a cart and wander. Some larger stores will accept US currency, and all large stores will accept credit cards. Smaller stores, and grocery stores may accept only Chinese cash, so have some on hand. If you can, find a traditional market (you’ll know it is a traditional market by the availability of dried herbs, mushrooms, and scorpions and centipedes). I’m pretty sure that you can bring back some interesting teas, but I’ve not tried to bring back any dried invertebrates. Probably frowned upon by customs. If dried insects don’t tempt you, you can always find a small dragon or other creature from the Chinese zodiac carved from purple jade; it will be a perfect part of Chengdu to bring home. Even the “normal” food may be different, as in the strange flavors of Ritz crackers, Oreos and baby food (lotus root? Quite good actually) that we discovered.



Photo by Tim & Marci

Go to the Ren Min (People’s) Park where there is a tea house, and another chance to get your ears cleaned and for locals to come up to you to practice their English. Whether it has anything to do with one of the last remaining gigantic statues of Chairman Mao overlooking the park or not, I hear that marriage matches are also made there.



Photo by Audrey