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INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL NEWS

NOVEMBER 2000 TOURS IN REVIEW

Candid appraisals of group tours

CHINA

After reading stories in *ITN's* September '99 issue on **China Plus Tours** (6360 LBJ Freeway, Ste. 100, Dallas, TX 75240; phone 888/868-8811 or 972/386-0188, fax 972/386-0166 or e-mail chinaplus@netzero.net), we booked the 19-day "China and the Yangtze River Plus Hong Kong" with China Plus' Ping and Chris Lee, March 23-April 10, '00. The cost was \$3,548, not including airfare.

Chris Lee is a native of China but has been a U.S. citizen for the last 10 years. He has 21 years of experience in China travel, including several years with CITS, China's official travel organization. He is a caring man of many talents who fine-tunes every tour to make it as enjoyable as possible for his tour members.

Our tour was booked into 5-star hotels and restaurants when available, and in order to experience a variety of cuisines we didn't eat in the same place twice.

Of the five domestic flights included in the tour, on British and American aircraft, only one was not on time.

We began our trip with 2½ days in Beijing. We saw Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace and the Ming Tombs and walked



Rider shaded by a parasol mounted on her bicycle — Guilin. Photo: Zeluck

on the Great Wall. We then flew to the modern and teeming city of Shanghai to visit the Bund (waterfront, glorious at night), the Yu Gardens and the memorable Jade Temple. A half-day boat ride on the canal to Suzhou made it possible to visit the silk and embroidery factories and the unique Bonsai Gardens.

Every day was an exciting adventure, beginning with the Western and Chinese offerings at the buffet breakfast. (All meals were included in the cost, except lunch and dinner

during our two days in Hong Kong.)

For our 5-day Yangtze River cruise, we boarded the comfortable *Victoria I* in Wuhan and traveled upstream to Chongqing, seeing the Three Gorges, the Lesser Three Gorges and the site of the dam, which is scheduled to be completed in 2008. Construction on the dam began in 1997 and is presently ahead of schedule. When it is complete, the dam will submerge 632 square kilometers, including 13 cities, 140 towns, 1,352 villages, 657 factories and 30,000 hectares of cultivated farmland.

We disembarked in Chongqing, a 3,000-year-old city of millions of people and the seat of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government during World War II. The city was often bombed but never occupied by the Japanese. It is the home of the Stilwell Museum, which houses mementos of General Joseph Stilwell and General Claire Chennault's famous Flying Tigers, who had an airfield in Chongqing.

We visited the Workers' Palace of Culture and a Marriage Custom Center, where we learned about the marriage customs involved in arranged marriages, common until just recently.

We flew to Xi'an to view the Terra Cotta Warriors, discovered by farmers digging a well in 1975. Another short flight took us to Guilin for a boat cruise along the scenic Li River, with majestic limestone peaks, landscapes, villages and rice paddies. We stopped at the souvenir market at Yangsud.

From Guangzhou (Canton), we continued down the Pearl River estuary in a catamaran for a 3-hour trip to the South China Sea and the

island of Hong Kong, where beautiful Victoria Peak towers above Repulse Bay. We took a sampan ride to the fishing village of Aberdeen.

Since July 1, 1997, when the British Union Jack came down and Hong Kong became a part of the People's Republic of China, "little has changed except the flag," according to our guide. "One country, two systems." Hong Kong is still self-governed, and all revenue remains on the island, he said. The 50-year agreement between Britain and China ends on July 1, 2047, when Hong Kong will hold its collective breath.

With guides Ping and Chris Lee,

this tour is first class, and at \$3,548 it's a bargain!

— BILL VEIDT, Austin, TX

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