

# Discovering the best of

# — CHINA —

by Michael Maratos

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Twenty-two travellers from the Men's Probus Club of Brighton, Vic, departed Melbourne bound for China; arriving in Beijing 18 hours later, tired but looking forward to the following morning's activities with National Guide, Michael. He turned out to be a real gem. His knowledge, courtesy and efficiency made the holiday totally stress free.

The first two days were spent in Beijing where we walked the vast area of Tiananmen Square, entering the gates of the Forbidden City. This remarkably well-preserved imperial palace is the largest palace in the world with almost 10,000 rooms. The group watched the local retirees exercising and enjoying other activities in the gardens of the Temple of Heaven.

The picturesque Summer Palace, surrounded by magnificent gardens and lake was a highlight as was the Great Wall of China. It was a beautifully warm day in the city but once we reached the wall strong winds blasted and driving rain blinded us as we attempted the short but steep walk along the wall.

After flying to Yichang on the Yangtze River, our group boarded the MV *Emperor* for a four night cruise upriver. We viewed the Three Gorges Dam and passed through the five-stage lock system where the boat was lifted more than 150 metres. The scenery along this part of the river was magnificent and travellers enjoyed the excursion on a sampan to the lesser gorges on a narrower part of the river.

Following the cruise we visited the Chongqing Zoo and watched the Pandas at play. It was good to see these animals with comparative freedom of movement and not spending their whole time couped up in cages.

From here we flew to Xian, the most historic city in China and the capital of ancient China for 11 dynasties. It is also where the Terracotta Warriors were discovered

over 30 years ago. To date, this archaeological site has yielded some 8,000 ancient terracotta soldiers and horses, each unique and finely detailed. It was an experience to see the excavation site and restoration of these fine pieces.

On to Hangzhou to see the beautiful West Lake. This area has been set aside for family gatherings and outings and is apparently always very well frequented. Many kilometres of walking paths through magnificent gardens enable visitors to fully enjoy their leisure time. Boats are available for hire as are paddle-oh's and regular passenger boats cruise on the waters.

The most beautiful part of China is the gardens and parklands. One always imagines that the Japanese were the founders and creators of such beautiful gardens. The Chinese were actually the leaders in this area. With so many people in this country it is amazing that such a large area is devoted to this type of beauty.

On route to Shanghai we stopped off at Wuzhen — the Venice of the East. It is an example of a watertown, typical of this part of China. A little like a rabbit warren and where we managed to "lose" three members of the group. One couple had the good fortune to be carrying a mobile phone and were located in a short time. The third "misplaced person" was only discovered to be missing at lunch when one of the seats was unoccupied. Of course she had the sense to return to the bus so wasn't at all worried but marital bliss was slightly affected due to the fact that her spouse had not realised she was not present!

After a night in Suzhou the group travelled to the huge modern city of Shanghai — with 17 million inhabitants, amazing architecture. The Fine Arts Museum houses a very large and quite magnificent collection of Ming and Qing porcelain and is a must see. They also have an excellent display of jade and Chinese calligraphy.

Without exception the whole group commented on the excellence of this tour. From the guides to the food



*Lyn Williams, Joan Maratos, Michael Maratos and Lyn Reeves "Keeping Warm" at the Great Wall of China (Wall in background)*

and accommodation and the itinerary it could only be said that it proved to be beyond our expectations. The ages of the travellers ranged from 55 to 85 years and it didn't prove to be too strenuous for the older group. If considering an overseas group trip our club highly recommends China Bestours and indeed China as a destination.



*Brighton Probusians at the Gates of the Forbidden City.*