

Warming ties, affluence gets more Chinese travelling

Matt Hodges
SHANGHAI

SHANGHAI resident Li Xuesong comes from an upper-middle-class family but he does not have any memories of going anywhere with his parents when he was young, not even to places in China.

"Thirty years ago, people had no idea of travelling abroad. It was considered too much of a luxury," Li says.

Now, as a travel agent with two decades' experience, Li sees Chinese students flooding foreign universities and stands on the brink of an outbound tourism boom.

He took his daughter Jiayi to Thailand himself when she was just six years old and she is now studying in Berlin.

"Things have changed so much. Back in the 1970s, there was so much propaganda about 'Western imperialists' that we had to be careful even talking to foreign tourists, because you never knew if a secret policeman would walk up and start questioning you," he says.

Many of the early travellers were actually technicians and other Chinese specialists sent overseas to help foster bilateral relations, he adds.

But whereas international travel was fraught with difficulty, domestic travel was

almost laughably cheap in comparison with today's white-collar salaries.

"When I started in the business in the 1980s, one-way tickets from Shanghai to Beijing cost 90 yuan (B\$18.60), or 101 yuan from here to Guangzhou," Li says.

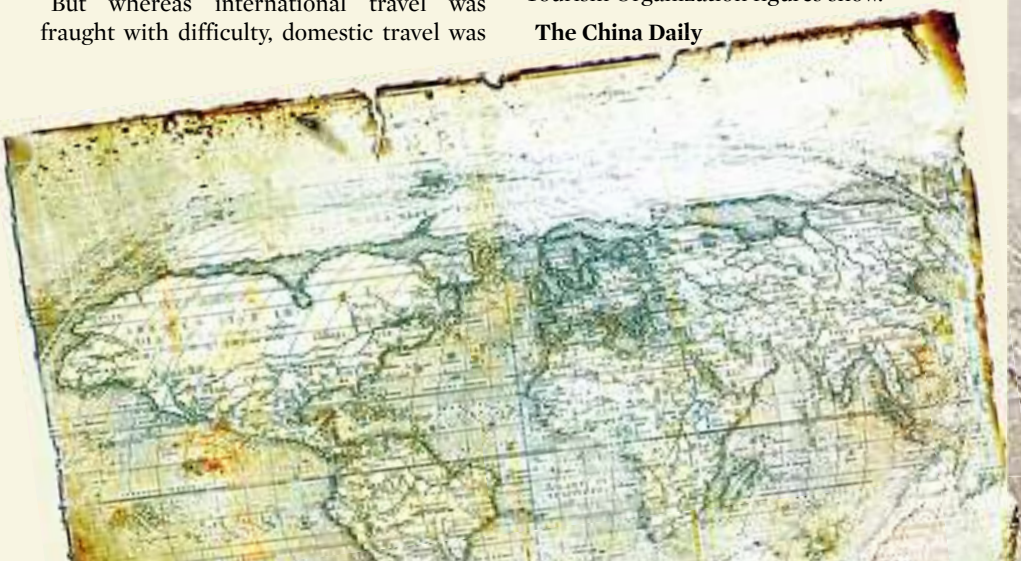
Southeast Asia was one of the initial draws for Chinese with passports and cash to burn, then Australia and New Zealand. Europe opened up in 1985 with the advent of the first Schengen Agreement, a significant benchmark that offered tourists a free pass to hop across 10 countries' borders on just one visa.

"Now it's more popular to fly into Paris and out of Rome 7-9 days later," Li says, adding that next year's FIFA World Cup host South Africa, and especially its precious stones, was one of the hottest draws for his customers this summer, along with the pyramids of Egypt.

Li estimates that 1-in-5 residents in major cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou now travel overseas each year. Of these, most prefer to stay in Asia.

China's warming ties with the outside world also saw it welcome more than 46 million foreign tourists in 2006 to rank as the 4th most-visited country in the world, World Tourism Organization figures show.

The China Daily



Spectacular China – From teeming humanity to the Great Wall

Zhang Jin
BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

IT COULD be a demanding job to plan for a trip to China. Where to start? What places to choose? Shall I join a tour group? Do I need to speak Chinese to be able to get around?

China definitely deserves more than one trip. But the first trip often leaves the strongest impression. First impressions count. So, preparation is important.

The most-see sites include the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Terra-cotta Army, the cruise in Guilin and the skyline in Shanghai. This route incorporates both history – going back 2,000 years – and modernity, the rugged terrain of Northern China and the exquisite charm of the country's south.

For starters, a group package saves a lot of time, energy and trouble. As long as you speak English, you won't encounter much difficulty.

China has a lot to offer. Teeming humanity is one of the biggest spectacles. If this is not your cup of tea, make it a point to avoid China's "golden weeks", during which time all tourist destinations, especially the above hotspots, are totally jammed. Scenery is overwhelmed by

what Chinese call "people mountain, people sea".

No matter how much you like or dislike these popular tourist hangouts, the real China – or more accurately, most of China – is different. That's why China is worth exploring and discovering. The more you probe around, the more rewarding your travel will be.

Take the Great Wall. Don't settle for the Badaling section, which is synonymous with the Wall in the minds of most travellers. The Wall extends from the coast all the way to the desert. Much of it has

crumbled, but there are still places, even in the Beijing area, that have preserved its original splendour. Called the "Wild Wall", these sections exude a craggy grandeur that a restored part can never have.

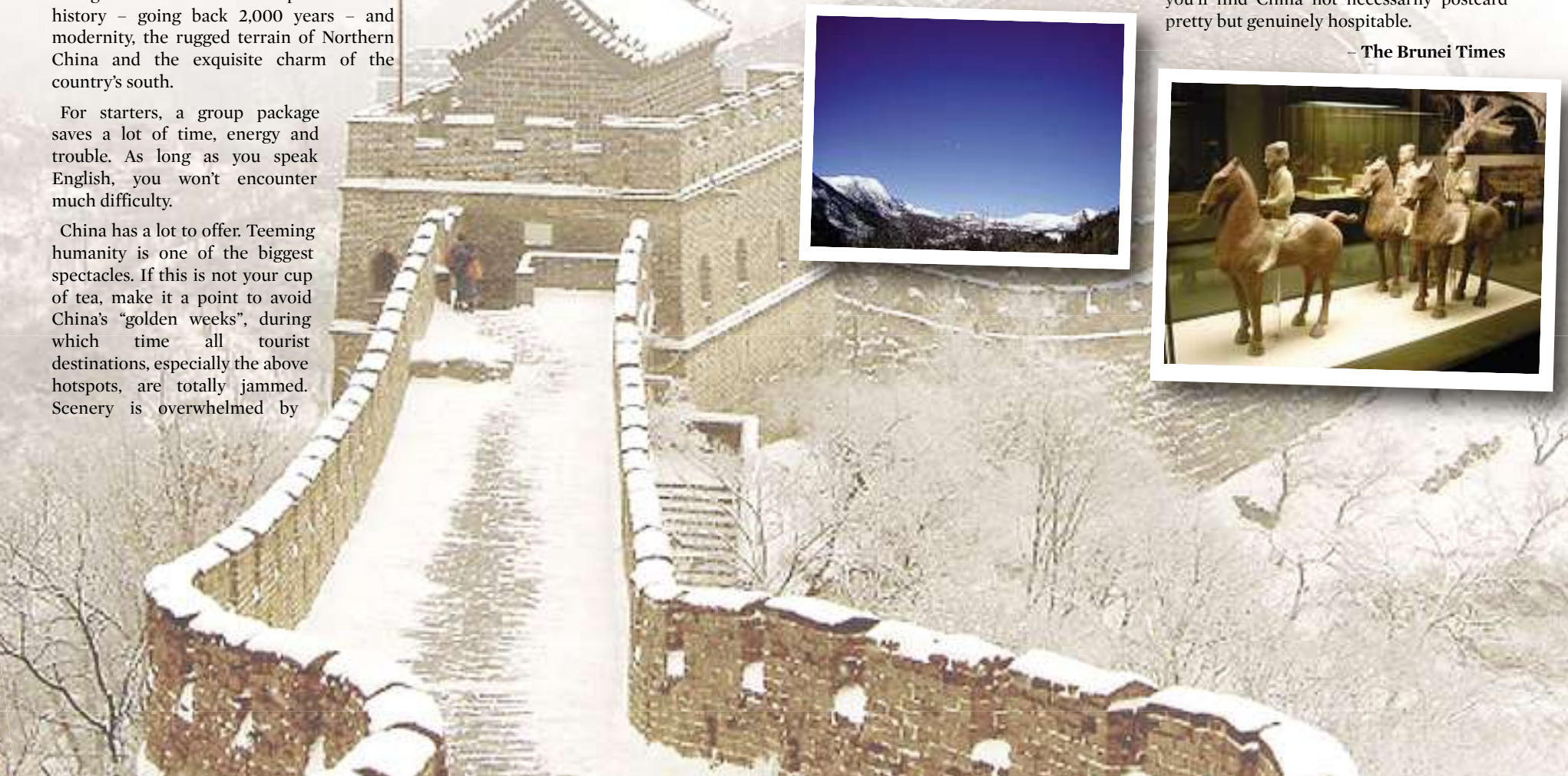
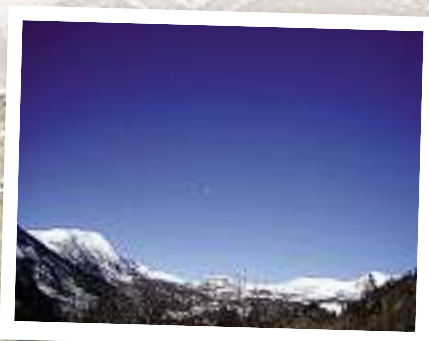
Shanghai may be cosmopolitan, but within two hours of metropolitan Shanghai there are a dozen small towns crisscrossed with canals and stone bridges. It is such a picture of idyllic tranquility that many thought they exist only in fiction.

If you count yourself as a brave soul, you should try some of the outlying destinations such as Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Qinghai and Tibet. China's ethnic minorities present

multifaceted and colourful cultures, but share something in common – a carnivalesque spirit. Here, people don't sip, they gulp; they don't giggle, they laugh uproariously; they don't croon, they sing their hearts out.

To understand and appreciate the real China, it helps to get away from the tourist itinerary once in a while. Visit the Temple of Heaven on Sunday and see what ordinary Chinese do in their spare time. Walk down a random street. Talk to your taxi driver. Get lost in an urban maze of alleyways or a canyon of high-rises (not in the wilderness, though). See what will happen. Most likely, you'll find China not necessarily postcard pretty but genuinely hospitable.

– The Brunei Times



TRAVEL TIPS

CHINA has become a major destination for holiday-makers in Brunei Darussalam. Almost 60 per cent of the 2,000 or so annual group packages for tourists in the Sultanate are bound for China. And there are a lot more backpackers. Here are some travel tips based on interviews with two local agencies, Anthony Tours & Travel and BonAsia Holiday Management Services.

Money exchange

In big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, credit cards are welcomed, but it would be better to always have some Chinese yuan with you. Most Chinese money exchangers do not serve Brunei dollars but they accept Singapore dollars. Hang Seng Bank in Hong Kong accepts Brunei dollars.

Weather

Temperatures could vary as many as 45 deg C from one place to another at any one time. It is not always the case that the farther northward you go, the colder it is. During summer time in eastern, central and northern China, it could be much hotter than Brunei.

Relief from urban life

One of the most prominent signs of China's rise was the mushrooming of modern cities. Many say there are not much difference between Hong Kong, Shanghai and New York. If you want relief from urban life, some remote areas such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia may just give you what you are looking for.

The right place to shop

Tourists are not encouraged to shop at stores near the tourist attractions, because souvenirs there are expensive. Business districts such as Wangfujing in Beijing and Xujiahui in Shanghai can give you good value for money. Second or third-tiered cities also have similar shopping areas, though much smaller.

Bargaining skills

If you are really interested in shopping at small, streetside booths around tourist attractions, you are advised to compare the prices among different booths. Usually the further you go, the better bargain you get.

Beware of your belongings

If you are going to a crowded place, which you are likely to do every now and then seeing that China is the most-populated country in the world, take care of your wallets and handbags from theft. The backpack is thieves' paradise.

Sea food, if no halal outlets

Halal food can be easily found in big Chinese cities but not so in smaller ones. A convenient alternative would be sea food restaurants. There are just numerous of them in coastal China. In addition, restaurants offer Xinjiang, Inner Mongolian cuisines are Syariah-compliant. And of course, vegetarian restaurants are always safe.

Planning saves time

Theme parks in China are usually big, with special performance staged only at a given time. It would be good if you can work out an itinerary before the tour starts. You have to take into consideration your interest and the waiting time. A map of the park and a programme list are often available at the entrance for your reference.

Zoos for the kids

Pandas and golden monkeys are two best-known species unique to China. And they can be seen in most big Chinese zoos. Don't forget to take your children to zoos if you happen to visit Beijing, Shanghai or Chengdu. They will have great fun to feed animals. Of course, you may need to spend a few dollars on the food. **– The Brunei Times (ZJ)**