

# CHINA:

*We'll give you  
the experience  
of a lifetime*

Despite the fact that it costs over \$3,000 for a holiday in China, the People's Republic remains a top favorite with Canadians looking for an exotic and exciting destination. A trip to China is an educational experience and this country arouses the curiosity perhaps more than any other.

In response to the flow of foreigners wanting to explore their vast, fascinating land, the Chinese government has started building western-style hotels and improving their existing accommodations, but it will be a while before the facilities catch up with the demand. In the meantime, most people stay at places like the Tung Fang in Guangzhou (Canton).

The Tung Fang is spartan but spacious, a huge Stalin-esque building with posters in the lobby and plush curtains discreetly dividing every floor. Our bedroom had a balcony from which we got a view over a People's Liberation Army Camp, a Chinese laundry and an ancient tower, the Flower Pagoda, a Guangzhou landmark that is over 1,400 years old.

The room itself was cavernous with two enormous beds, a massive desk and Victorian-style armchairs. The taps in the bathroom delivered water at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. only—tough if you wanted to wash during the day, but as air-conditioning in China is rare, braving the cold water was often better than nothing after a busy day's sightseeing.

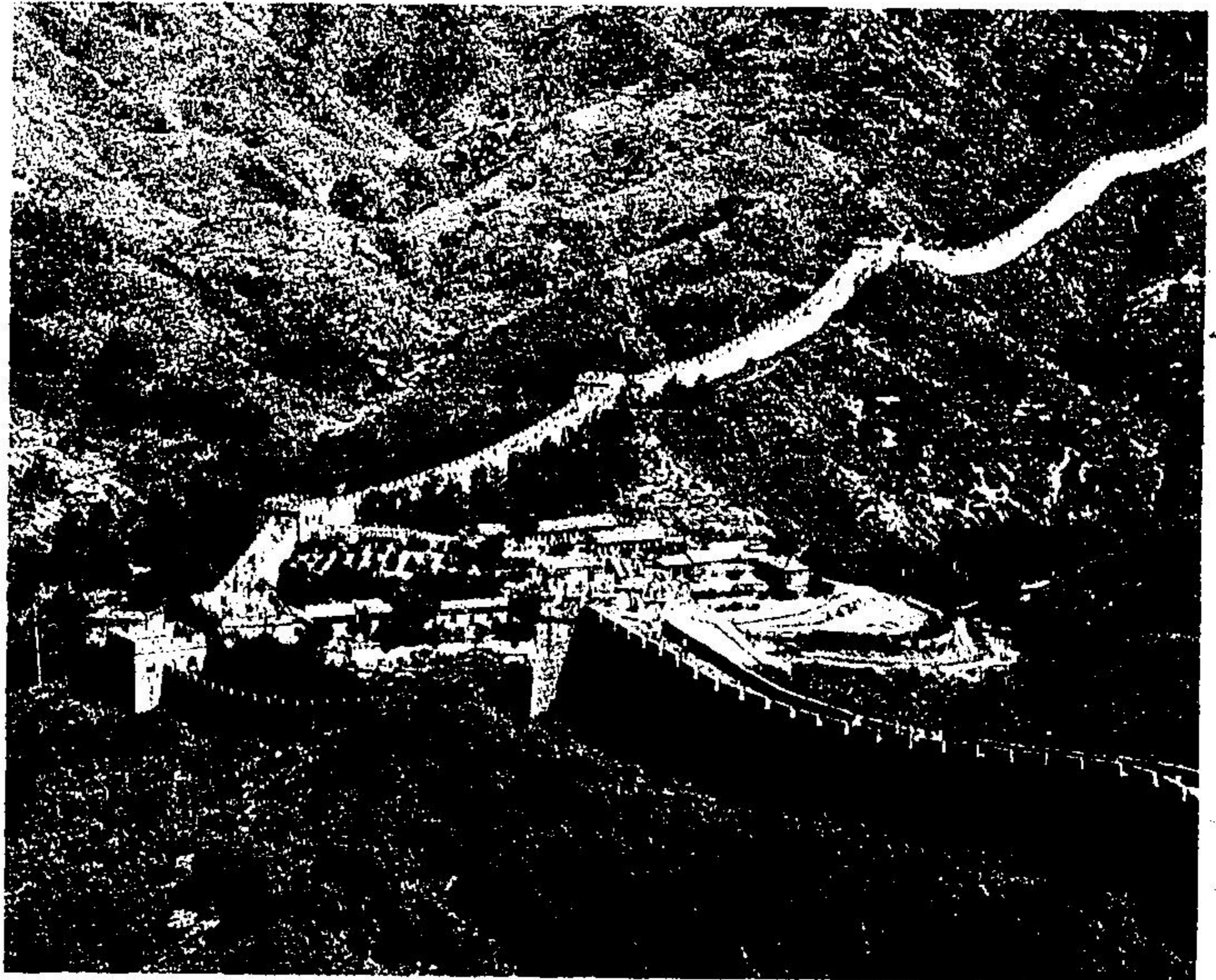
Our days started early, and from the moment we arrived our time was tightly scheduled to include visits to communes, factories and kindergartens. These visits tend to be rigid and formal with visitors being regaled by rehearsed political speeches and boring recitations of production figures before and after "liberation"—i.e., the time when the communist government took over in 1949.

Nevertheless, there are many light moments. We were taken to the famous East is Red kindergarten in Guangzhou. The children were colorfully dressed and neatly turned out. They smiled obediently for our cameras and went through their exercises solemnly and with deep concentration. Highlight of the visit was a cultural show during which the children dressed up in costume and sang songs and danced for their Foreign Friends (as visitors are called).

Most of the plays and songs had political and military undertones. Six-year-olds belted out mouthfuls like "The Freedom Train Puffs Across the Countryside to visit our Chairman in Beijing (Peking)," but they did it with such charm and grace that it was hard to resist the little, friendly faces.

Political influences are even stronger in the shows put on by professional actors and musicians, but the Chinese sense of theatre is marvellous and visitors cannot help but be impressed by the colorful costumes, superb sets and magnificent music. During the last couple of years too, there has been a swing away from shows with a moral message back to the more traditional forms of Chinese entertainment, like Peking Opera, now included in many tours.

The tours are also taking in holiday resorts, which not so long ago were out of bounds to all but Party officials. One such



Great Wall of China

retreat is Conghua Hot Springs, 81 kilometres north of Guangzhou. There are several hotels in the spa town and the rooms come with deep baths, big enough to swim in, with steaming hot water which smells strongly of the healing salts for which Conghua is famous.

Another resort not far from Guangzhou is Seven Star Crag, so named because the seven limestone hills that make up the settlement, form a pattern like the Big Dipper. You can climb the crags and get a stunning view out over the surrounding countryside, and bridges and walkways link a series of pretty pavilions dotted around on a man-made lake. In this area there are several villages within walking distance and you see scenes of rural China that haven't changed much down the centuries—ponderous water buffalo ploughing rice fields and bent backs picking at rice under paddy.

The countryside of China is a delight, but the cities are dismal and shabby. Living accommodation is basic, to put it politely, and air is badly polluted and the houses are dimly lit (40-watt bulbs are the strongest for sale in the shops).

But even in the towns, it's a good idea to go wandering about on your own. That way you see so much more of everyday Chinese life than you can on an "official" tour. In the course of an afternoon I came across a housewife bathing a reluctant duck and a barber cutting his client's hair in the middle of the sidewalk.

The biggest problems are the traffic (which is horrendous) and the street signs, which are all written in Chinese. If you're nimble, you can dodge the buses, bicycles and trucks and there's no need to worry if you get lost. The Chinese are curious but friendly towards foreigners and they'll do everything they can to get you back to your hotel if you get off the beaten track.

#### Travel Information

CP Air operates flights to China through Vancouver. The airline also has a program of packaged tours. Details from Ross Travel, Georgetown Marketplace, 877-0138.

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