

Chinese tourists

Tourists should beware Beijing

By VINCENT EGAN

Events in Beijing earlier this month - massive student demonstrations, and their brutal suppression by the Chinese military - are a reminder of some of the darker aspects of life in the Communist world.

In the past three years or so, Canadians and other westerners have shown a remarkable interest in travelling to China (which, for practical purposes, means the two largest cities - Beijing and Shanghai).

We have, it seems, a readiness to set aside all that we have reliably learned about dictatorships, or at least to give them the benefit of the doubt.

As well, we have a natural curiosity. Who wouldn't be curious about the largest country on earth, its Great Wall and its Forbidden City?

Whatever the reason, it seems to be easy to allay the qualms and scruples about totalitarian regimes, in the excitement and anticipation of travel to such countries.

Few still recall, for example, the huge protest marches by Shanghai students in December, 1986, and the more widespread demonstrations seven years earlier.

NO NEWS

In time, the pro-democracy demonstrations of June, 1989, and the regime's violent crackdown will also fade from memory - partly, of course, because the authorities have clamped a lid on such information as the number of civilian casualties and the fate of the "counter-revolutionaries" (student leaders). Then, the flow of western travellers to China will no doubt resume.

For now, however, most travel to China is off. Potential visitors have been largely deterred by reports that ordinary tourists have recently been harassed and threatened by Chinese soldiers.

Tour organizers in Canada stand

to lose the deposits they had paid to the Chinese tourism authorities, on behalf of their clients, for travel and accommodation that have been cancelled. They are hopeful of recouping some of their losses when Chinese conditions return to normal and international travel to the "Middle Kingdom" resumes.

In the meantime, foreign airlines have been and are striving to meet the demand for space on flights leaving China for the West.

PICTURE MIXED

Those who have returned from China in recent years - since the spring of 1986, say, when Canadian Airlines International inaugurated its Canada-China service - have noted a mixed picture.

On the positive side, Beijing has some good-quality hotels such as the Holiday Inn Lido, and a few good western-style restaurants, ranging from Maxim's to three Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets (which shut down at the beginning of June).

A fairly modern and efficient subway system traverses the spread-out capital city, making for easy access to the many points of interest in the centre of the capital - Tiananmen (the Gate of Heavenly Peace - an ironic name in the light of recent events); the vast, 98-acre Tiananmen Square; the Great Hall of the People (the parliament building) and Museum of Chinese History; the Forbidden City (Imperial Palace Museum).

Farther from the city centre, the Beijing region abounds in attractions such as the 717-acre Summer Palace with its sparkling lake, the stately Ming Tombs, and, of course, the Great Wall.

GROUP TRAVEL

But there's another aspect to the tourism picture. Most visitors take either a pre-paid escorted tour or, if they are on a tight budget, make their own arrangements with China International Travel Service (CITS).

Those on package tours are

generally accommodated in moderate-to-good hotels, but bear in mind that Chinese hotels have a tendency to deteriorate fairly rapidly. (Neglect of essential maintenance seems to be common throughout the Communist world.)

In and around Beijing, tour packages almost always take in the Ming Tombs and the Great Wall, and quite probably two or three dimly lit pottery factories where plenty of time is allowed for purchases.

As for "budget" travellers, reports suggest that they frequently encounter poor standards of cleanliness in hotel bedrooms and bathrooms, and surly service in dining rooms (which isn't unusual in better-class hotels, either).

Moving around China, for those who don't speak Chinese, can be difficult. Individual travellers find that much depends upon the efficiency of the local CITS bureau. Lining up for railway and airline tickets can consume hours, with the distinct possibility of a curt "no" at the end.

Even when service isn't deliberately unhelpful, western visitors are often charged higher prices than "overseas Chinese" visitors and the local population - for identical services.

In short, any apparent bargains in travelling independently to and within China may well be illusory, and likely beset by red tape.

There seems to be good reason to fear that the authorities will attack "bourgeois influence" (the movement for democracy) with a return to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, which led to serious shortages of scientists, technologists and managers.

Sooner or later, there may be another Great Leap Forward into the 19th century. Foreign travel in China in the near future will probably continue at a reduced level, eventually regaining its momentum. But for now, discretion should prevail over curiosity.

KIT N' CARLYLE® by Larry Wright



Coolers keep summer foods fresh

By the Editors of Consumer Reports

Whether you're off to a picnic in the park or a feast on the beach, containers that keep your food fresh and cold are a welcome addition. But how do you choose among the many ice chests, coolers and jugs?

Recently, Consumer Reports' testers evaluated 12 small-capacity ice chests, five beverage coolers and 11 jugs. As a practical matter, any of the tested containers should see you through a day in the hot sun. But there were differences in capacity, features and price to consider.

When you're shopping for a cooler chest, size is a prime factor. Even "small" chests vary quite a bit in capacity. Some claim to hold 15 to 18 quarts. There are also smaller models, either with flat lids or an arched top like an old-time lunchbox, that have a claimed capacity of seven or eight quarts. Remember that in any chest, loose ice or ice bottles may take up as much as half of the space.

The Igloo Legend 24, \$14, and the Coleman 18, \$20, offered the best combinations of insulating value and usable volume. They each hold a little more than 15 quarts. If you don't need

a container that big, consider the 12-quart Arctic Cozy Cooler, \$12, or the 8-quart Coleman Personal 8, \$10. The Gott Super Lunch Tote 17042, \$15, with a 12-quart capacity has an extra nicety: The lid stores a removable 1 1/4-quart ice bottle, which filled and frozen should keep the chest's contents cold for a full day's outing.

Coolers are wide-mouthed containers which typically hold three gallons. The models tested can also hold two intact six-packs or 18-20 cans if you break them out of their packs. They can also handle tall soda bottles. Each cooler has a spigot at the bottom front

- you pour a drink by pressing a button on the spigot.

All the beverage coolers performed well. Two models by Coleman (\$18 and \$25) were judged the most convenient. They're designed so that the spigot inlet is in a drain well - you don't have to tip the coolers to empty them. The Rubbermaid Gott 1683, \$25, kept drinks colder a little longer than the others.

Picnic jugs hold two to four quarts of cold beverage. They have a spigot or spout so you can pour a drink without opening the cap.

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