

Yangtze cruise adds depth to a captivating China tour complete with must-sees like the Great Wall and the Terra Cotta Soldiers

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THE DESTINATION

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations, with a fascinating history and culture dating back thousands of years. Located in eastern Asia, the People's Republic of China is the third largest country in the world, with a population of more than 1.3 billion people.

I recently returned from an amazing 12-day trip with Jade Tours – a modified version of their “Magnificent Yangtze - China and Yangtze River” package. Our itinerary included three nights in Beijing, one night in Xian, and a three-night Yangtze River cruise followed by three nights in Shanghai. Jade Tours offers several options for longer tours, some including visits to Hong Kong.

TOUR DESTINATIONS

Beijing

One of the most historically rich cities in China, Beijing was recently centre stage as the host city for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Located in northern China (formerly known as Peking), it's home to more than 17 million people. It has been the capital of the People's Republic of China since the Communist victory in the civil war in 1949. The famous uprising in Beijing's Tian'anmen Square in 1989 is known worldwide.

Xi'an

Xi'an is the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, the 2000-year old trade route connecting Asia to Europe. One of the oldest cities in China, it still has the old City Wall, which is lit up at night. The famous Terra Cotta soldiers, located nearby, have made this central/northwest Chinese city an extremely popular tourist destination.

Yangtze River

Measuring 3950 miles, the Yangtze is the third longest river in the world (after the Amazon and Nile Rivers). Known as the Golden Watercourse, the river is politically, culturally, historically, and agriculturally significant to China. Serving as the dividing line between north and south China, the Yangtze provides a vital transportation and trade route. The cities that line its shores are vibrant and exciting. There are dozens of historical sites, caves, and carvings to explore en route, along with spectacular natural gorges and rock formations.

Shanghai

This modern coastal city of 20 million people at the mouth of the Yangtze River is Mainland China's centre for commerce and finance, and has been described as the showpiece of one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

ATTRACTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Beijing

Central Beijing boasts Tian'anmen Square and the Forbidden City, former residence of the emperors of China. Don't miss the Summer Palace, the largest royal park retreat during the Qing Dynasty (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site). A favourite with our tour group were our stops at a freshwater pearl store and a factory making beautiful cloisonné items.

A visit to Beijing is not complete without seeing the Great Wall of China at Mutianyu, with round-trip cable car rides up to the wall. Built to keep out invaders from Mongolia, 200 miles to the north, the Great Wall is over 4000 miles long. Five different locations along the Great Wall are open to public access.

Our visit gave us ample opportunity to experience the culture of old Beijing. We took a Hutong Tour, exploring the ancient alleyways by pedicab (rickshaw) after viewing the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower. Along the way, we stopped at a local family's home to enjoy tea and a visit. In this ancient district, residents have to use public showers and toilets as there are no bathrooms in the homes.

Xi'an

It's easy to understand why the Terra Cotta Warriors at Xi'an have been designated the Eighth Wonder of the World. There are an estimated 8,000 life-size pottery warriors and horses at this site. Excavation has uncovered an incredible army, complete with soldiers and officers, kneeling and standing archers, bronze chariots, and horses.

Our visit to Xi'an also included an evening performance and dinner theatre showcasing the Tang Dynasty. The Chang'an music, dance, and stunning costumes made it an event not to be missed.

Yangtze River Cruise

For me, the tour's highlight was the three-night Yangtze River cruise aboard the 5-star Victoria Anna. This two-year-old ship, which carries approximately 280 passengers, features elegant cabins, each with a balcony. We sailed downstream from Chongqing to Yichang. (Other tours sail all the way to Shanghai.)

Before boarding the ship in Chongqing, we spent the afternoon visiting the Ciqikou old Town and the Panda Zoo. Also included in our fare were three excellent one-day shore excursions: a visit to the Ghost City of Feng Du, the incredible Lesser Gorges at Wushan, and the Three Gorges Dam site.

Evening entertainment, provided by our multi-talented crew, included a Chinese dynasty fashion show and a cabaret show.

Shanghai

The array of activities in Shanghai is dazzling. Why not spend time at The Bund, Shanghai's famous waterfront? Or enjoy a full day touring the city of Suzhou, where you can visit a local silk-spinning mill and the silk embroidery institute, or spend a lazy afternoon cruising down the Grand Canal of China (the longest and largest man-made waterway in the world). If you just have to have the latest, don't miss shopping on Nanjing Road. In the evening, a highlight for me was the famous Chinese Acrobatic show at the Lyceum Theatre.

ACCOMMODATION

Jade Tours provides modern 4- and 5-star accommodation at each destination. Our hotels were excellent -- centrally located close to shopping and restaurants, with breakfast included each day.

DINING

You are treated to a delightful selection of Chinese cuisine as you move through the different regions of China on your tour. Enjoy the famous Peking Duck, a scrumptious dumpling dinner, or a Szechuan feast. Dining on the river cruise ship was casually elegant, and the buffet meals were excellent.

GETTING AROUND

Our main transportation throughout China was in a 15-passenger Toyota bus. For flights within China, we flew with Hainan Airlines and Shanghai Airlines.

GETTING THERE

Many international airlines travel to Beijing and Shanghai from Vancouver, including Air Canada, Cathay Pacific and Air China. Air Canada and Air China generally offer direct flights between May and October.

TRAVEL TIPS

- Currency is the yuan renminbi. You can exchange Canadian or U.S. dollars in China.
- Canadian citizens require a passport valid for 6 months from the date of arrival into China, plus a tourist visa, which must be obtained prior to departure.
- Throughout China, 220-volt electricity is used.
- Bargaining is expected unless you are in a department store where prices are fixed.
- A trip to China is not complete without purchasing some beautiful freshwater pearls, jade, or cloisonné souvenirs.
- Baggage limit is 20 kg for flights within China.
- Internet cafes were available in most of our hotels and on the ship.
- Inoculations: check with the International Travel Clinic for current recommendations.
- Some attractions/restaurants have only Asian toilets.
- Most attractions do not have handicapped facilities, and stairs and uneven cobblestone streets are common.
- Our guides all spoke fluent English; however, if you are going out on your own, make sure the name of your hotel is written down in Chinese, as the taxi drivers often do not read or speak English.
- All our hotels and cruise-ship cabins included in-room safe deposit boxes.
- Onboard the river cruise, the suggested tip was \$10 U.S. per person per day.
- Our national guide recommended that we lock our luggage.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If wonders like the Great Wall and the Terra Cotta Warriors are on your must-see list, see us! Contact Susan Marriott at (403-216-4500) or email smarriott@calgarycoop.com. Or visit any Calgary Co-op Travel Office; dial our Call Centre (403-299-4144) for service after hours, Sundays and holidays; or book online 24/7 via www.calgarycoop.com.