



BLOWN AWAY BY BEIJING

Text and photos by Dr Chie Zhi Ying

Right after the final MBBS exams in April this year, all my friends had already flown overseas or were preparing to do so. Meanwhile, I was relishing every bit of my freedom (my first real holiday ever since I started medical school), and having a good time just lazing around, shopping, watching TV, eating and sleeping (yes, picture a complete couch potato).

After a few twists and turns, I decided to head to Beijing with my family for my grad trip. *Wait a minute, you are going to Beijing?* Such was the typical response I got when others found out about my holiday plans, their eyes widening in disbelief. But I had always been curious about the Forbidden City and the Great Wall of China (all thanks to popular Chinese period dramas). As seeing is believing, what better way to satisfy my curiosity and indulge in some sightseeing than travelling to Beijing? This ancient city has been the capital of China since the Ming Dynasty, and best of all, it is a big melting pot of politics, economics and history.

Before the trip, I was worried about Beijing's harsh chilly weather and infamous sandstorms. Thank goodness, Beijing was generally all clear and good during my visit, except for the occasional strong winds and certainly cold climate (which caused teary eyes and a runny nose throughout the trip).

Going back into history

We landed in Beijing and had a good night's rest, before officially starting our tour the next day. First, we visited the Temple of Heaven (Tiantan), a sprawling complex where emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties held grand annual sacrificial ceremonies to pray to the heavens for rain and good harvests in the coming year. In ancient China, the emperor was regarded as the Son of Heaven so only he could have the honour of praying to the heavens for prosperity and abundance on behalf of his people. The temple's primary attraction is its masterpiece building, Qiniandian, which has a triple-layered circular roof lined with exquisite blue tiles, because the colour represented the sky and heavens. From afar, the Temple of Heaven is truly breathtaking, with radiant spring flowers blossoming in the background and elegantly crafted corridors leading to the complex. Once I had reached the foot of the building, I found its grandeur and serenity up close equally awe-inspiring. It is no wonder the ancient Chinese regarded it as the place closest to Heaven – immensely spectacular and yet peaceful.

Our next stop was Tiananmen Square, one of the largest and most famous city squares in the world. Tiananmen Square, located just outside the Forbidden City, was where the emperor would announce imperial edicts and partake in celebratory occasions. I was





told that the daily flag-raising ceremony is a must-see. Thousands of visitors, mainly people from all corners of China, would flock to the city square to catch a glimpse of the ceremony every morning. Interestingly, when a foreign head of state visits Beijing, the visiting country's flag will be raised next to China's, as a mark of respect.

Then we crossed an underground passage and finally reached the main gate of the Forbidden City, which used to be home to a total of 24 emperors from the Ming (1368 - 1644) and Qing (1644 - 1912) dynasties, over a period of more than five centuries. The well-preserved Forbidden City is a testament of supreme craftsmanship and stately magnificence. Rectangular in shape, it is the world's largest palace complex, covering 74 hectares, containing nearly 9,000 rooms and surrounded by a 52-metre-wide moat and a 10-metre-high wall. There are unique and delicately structured towers at all four corners of the complex, where one can get a bird's eye view of happenings inside and outside the palace.

The Forbidden City is mainly divided into the Inner Court and Outer Court. The former is where the emperor lived with the royal family, while the latter is where the emperor would discuss state affairs and make important decisions with high ranking officials from all over the country.

Seeing the actual palaces and halls in the city was unbelievably exhilarating, as it felt like history was unfolding right before my eyes. I took my time to walk on bricked ground that was more than five centuries old and touched weathered pillars that were equally ancient! (This would have been impossible in the past, as commoners like me would not be even allowed near the palace.) It was a pity that visitors could not enter the buildings, for I would have loved to sit on the emperor's



throne and look down at the court from that prime position, or picture myself as a palace maid wearing heeled shoes and tottering awkwardly around in my oriental robes.

We also visited the emperor's personal chamber, known as the Palace of Heavenly Purity (Qianqinggong), where a plaque inscribed with the words *zheng da guang ming* (meaning "fair and above board") hangs above the emperor's throne. This plaque is famous because Qing emperors used to conceal secret imperial edicts with the name of their successors to the throne written on them, behind the plaque. This practice bred tales of foul play in an era where fierce power struggles existed among princes, each eager to become the next ruler of the land.

After catching a glimpse of the emperor's life in the Forbidden City, we visited the Great Wall of China! Various sections of the Great Wall were built during the Spring and Autumn Period (around 700 to 400 BC) and the Warring States Period (around 400 to 200 BC) by



several warring states as individual fortress walls. But the Great Wall we know today was built and connected by the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, after he unified China. The Great Wall and its branches have been rebuilt and extended by generations of rulers, and spans more than 20,000 kilometres long. The wall consists mainly of city wall platforms, passes and towers. It was initially used as an impeccable fortress to fend off military incursions from aggressors in the northern regions. The best preserved section of the Great Wall that offers the best view in Beijing is Badaling.

To be honest, climbing to Badaling's first watch tower was no mean feat. As Badaling is located in a hilly area, it was freezing cold and harsh winds blew sand into my eyes as I attempted to ascend the steep steps leading to the

watch tower. I felt an overwhelming sense of achievement when I reached the top of the tower, although I was still far from the highest point. Nevertheless, it was still a thrilling experience to admire the picturesque mountains, valleys and the greenery surrounding the Great Wall, from where I was. The scenery was absolutely gorgeous!

After a short rest, we were off to the Summer Palace (Yiheyuan, which can be translated as "Garden of Nurtured Harmony"), touted as one of the most beautiful imperial gardens in the world and the masterpiece of Chinese garden landscape design. The Summer Palace combines the best of natural landscapes (such as hills and open waters) with man-made ones (like pavilions, palaces and bridges). It undoubtedly lives up to its name of being a harmonious ensemble of aesthetically appealing architecture and design.



The highlights of the palace are the Longevity Hill and Kunming Lake. The scenery at the palace is so alluring that it was no wonder the infamous Empress Dowager Cixi called this place home in her old age. I could imagine her strolling leisurely in the gardens, with lots of palace maids and eunuchs fussing over her.

Shopping and eating

After visiting these captivating and eye-opening historical sites, we went on to do something all Singaporeans enjoy – shopping! Shopping in Beijing is mainly done in the Wangfujing shopping district, which has modern-looking shops and a great variety of goods on sale. I was amazed to see fake branded goods from “Gucci”, “Prada”, “Louis Vuitton” and so on, at Yashow Market and Silk Street. They looked exactly like the real thing, but were going for a song!

One dish you must try while in Beijing is the signature roasted Peking duck from the historical Quanjude restaurant – the crispy skin and tender meat were mouthwateringly delightful! We also tried delicious *jiaozi*, which the northern Chinese love. They are dumplings stuffed with pork and chives, and then fried, steamed or boiled in soup. We also visited the *hutongs* (alleys between squarish old Beijing residences known as *siheyuan*), and even had a one-of-a-kind trishaw ride through them. The local Beijing cuisine that we had in the *siheyuan* proved that most of the time, home-cooked food is much more appetising than restaurant dishes. And if you are feeling peckish, visit Nanluogu Alley where you can try yummy local street snacks, such as red bean yoghurt, fried dough sticks with ice cream, and *bingtang hulu* (candied hawthorn).

There is just so much to see in Beijing that one can never experience everything in one trip. On my last day in the city, as I sat on the coach heading towards the airport, I found myself revisiting all the memorable places in my mind. The rich and unique Chinese history and culture, the towering skyscrapers and entertainment outlets in the Central Business District vibrantly illuminated at night scene of, the iconic Bird's Nest (Beijing National Stadium) and Water Cube (Beijing National Aquatics Center) built for the 2008 Olympic Games, the Forbidden City, the Great Wall... My trip to the Chinese capital was indeed a memorable and meaningful journey that had allowed me to gain insights into my ancestral roots. If you love and appreciate history, be sure to visit Beijing. **SMA**



Photos

1. Braving windy and chilly weather to conquer the Great Wall at Badaling
2. The imposing Hall of Great Harmony (Taihedian), located in the Forbidden City's Outer Court, was where important imperial state ceremonies used to take place
3. Waiting patiently for a chef at Quanjude to prepare slices of delicious roasted Peking duck to be wrapped in egg crepes
4. The Beijing National Stadium, also known as the Bird's Nest, served as the main stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games
5. Tourists are offered a photo opportunity in Manchurian robes and headgear
6. Emperors once read court documents in this private study room in the Forbidden City's Hall of Mental Cultivation (Yangxindian)
7. The famous Nine-Dragon Wall (Jiulongbi) in Beihai Park
8. At the foot of the Temple of Heaven



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