

Foreign visitors intinerary does not include real China

Editor's Note: This is the last of three impression articles written by Renee Irvin, a University student who spent a semester studying at the Branch Campus of the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute. She and 14 other exchange students from Oregon returned from China in December.

The complexities of daily Chinese life and politics render any self-proclaimed "China expert" a fraud. What I can offer as a summary of my semester in Beijing, then, is only some observations on a narrowly defined topic.

Frequently, China's English language paper for the foreign community, the China Daily,

runs the following advertisement for a restaurant at Beijing's Great Wall Hotel:

"The duck galantine with pistachios and French truffles, excellent.

"The succulent lamb filets flambeed in cognac and saluted with a very special mustard sauce, exquisite.

"And the chocolate profiteroles filled with rich vanilla ice cream and smothered with hot chocolate sauce? Perfect."

For some, the "China experience" is a three-week luxury tour: A visit to the Temple of Heaven at 9 a.m., a banquet at Maxim's at noon, and a visit to the Friendship Store for the afternoon is a typical day in Beijing. (Incidentally, in September an Oregon student spotted Gov. Vic Atiyeh here in a hotel bar.)

Even for permanent foreign residents in Beijing, daily life can still be shielded from the life of a Chinese citizen. Aside from the fact that our living quarters are always isolated from normal Chinese homes, we are also separated by wealth. One day's salary from working at the office in America is worth the average Chinese monthly take-home pay. It's no wonder that foreigners are far less likely to be seen at art museums or Mao Zedong's maudoleum than at Wanujing, a large shopping district.

Certainly not all foreign "experts" spend half their time shopping for cloisonne vases and silk. Yet there are other ways through which a foreigner becomes shielded from



Photo by Renee Irvin
China's Great Wall is a popular tourist attraction, but most foreigners do not get to see everyday Chinese life.

Chinese citizens. Why take an inconvenient bus — so crowded that the last passenger to get on has his jacket caught in the door as the bus pulls away — when a smooth, quiet taxi ride costs only two dollars?

Most tourists will take home memories of the good life in China: The Yangtze River boat cruise, obsequious waiters at the Great Wall Hotel, and well-behaved Chinese toddlers who call you "foreign uncle."

Other daring and crafty tourists will go off by themselves for one day and later report their grim observations of life in a totalitarian system: cabbage piled high on the sidewalks, coal dust from open furnaces everywhere, and traffic coming to a halt so that a red-flag limousine can speed down Chang' An Avenue unimpeded.

Both types of tourists have been effectively isolated from daily Chinese life due to the short duration of their stay. For permanent foreign residents, though, getting to know the Chinese and their daily routines also is difficult. Foreign exchange students are no exception.

Foreign students may not have budgets to accommodate duck galantine at the Great Wall Hotel every Friday night, but conveniences that make life easier — taxi rides and gift shops for foreigners only — reduce the chances for conversations and possible friendships with Chinese citizens.

By Renee Irvin



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Expires January 30, 1985