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# SCALING THE HEIGHTS OF GUANGDONG

Moments of Reflection along the Tourist Trail

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01 JUN 2015: When the elevator doors opened on the 107th floor of the Canton Tower we immediately spotted the bright orange Bubble Tram; a ride that affords spectacular views of the

city of Guangzhou, 428 meters below. However, our focus turned to the sign that cautioned: “Psychotics and alcoholics are not allowed on the Bubble Tram”. I like to think that this, along with the fact that we still wanted to visit the 112th floor observation deck, accounted for our not taking the tram.



But we got our fill of heights and sites while in Guangdong Province, which sits on China’s mainland next to Hong Kong and Macau. Aside from the Canton Tower, we gawked at super tall buildings, climbed Mount Danxia in the north, and stood on the watchtowers of Kaiping Diaolou in the South.

Guangdong is China’s most populace province with 107 million people; Guangzhou the capital, houses seven million. But for those travellers who cringe at the prospect of having to elbow their way through lineups and crowded streets while constantly muttering *hmm ho yee see* (sorry) and *megoi* (excuse me), opportunities abound to enjoy moments of reflection in the alleyways, markets,

parks, mountain paths, bamboo groves and by the reeds on the shores of lotus ponds.

As part of a press trip organized by the China National Tourist Office in Toronto, we flew from Toronto to Shanghai and on to Guangzhou before checking into the Hotel Landmark Canton. My 17th floor room had a perfect view of the Pearl River, which wends its way past the hotel and seemingly disappears into the downtown core of the city. The next morning, while exploring the area, I came upon an old neighbourhood where small well-lived-in houses huddled along a narrow maze of streets. I wandered past entrances decorated with posters of door gods, to discourage evil spirits from entering; strings of laundry hanging across laneways, tiny vegetable and flower gardens, and even a few curious cats.



A small morning market featured tables of cut-up pork, whole chickens and live carp as well as carts filled with vegetables, taro and bananas. A large wire-mesh container held a dozen or so plump green frogs. An assortment of sausages hung on display racks near a shop where towers of circular wooden trays, each filled with fresh steaming buns, emitted a pleasant scented mist.

But then it was time to join the group to explore Gaungzhou. Our first stop was the 600 meter Canton Tower, the third tallest in the world. After visiting the upper decks (and checking out the

Bubble Tram) we drove across the river to Huacheng Square to take photos of the Tower from ground to sky, as well as the neighbouring 440 meter tall Guangzhou International Finance Centre.

Haucheng Square is also home to the children's museum and the beautifully designed public library, as well as coffee shops and large open spaces. After meeting and lunching with local officials (where toasting and drinking (and drinking) were de rigueur), we continued our tour with a visit to Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall that pays tribute to the Republic of China's founding father, and then headed for Shangxiajiu Pedestrian Street. This is a major shopping venue that goes on for blocks, and features shops, restaurants, street statues that reflect life in the 1920's and 30's, theatres, loud music, noisy barkers and hundreds of people shopping, strolling or just hanging out. Our day in Guangzhou ended several hours later with a relaxing and colourful evening cruise on the Pearl River.



The next day we drove three hours north to Danxia Mountain, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Danxia refers to landforms of red sandstone that have eroded over the years and now appear as sculpted rocks and sheer cliffs. Our first stop, the Yang Yuan Mountain (also known as the Male Rock), is one of the more popular attractions. At 28

meters high and 7 meters around, this rock formation resembles a phallus. While tourists position themselves for group photos and provocative selfies in front of the rock, some locals kneel before an altar to light incense and pray for fertility, for themselves and family members.

A lakeside lunch featured home cooking: fried chicken (with the head of the bird staring at us), mushroom and bamboo soup, steamed asparagus, fiddleheads, red peppers and bok choy, fat rice noodles on a bed of mountain greens drizzled in oyster sauce, and small fried river fish. It was not only tasty but very typical of the delicious food on which the province prides itself. For a digestif, we tasted 50 proof ‘Shi Hu Jiu’ a local rice wine that added some ‘zing’ to an already wonderful day.

A short boat trip highlighted red mountains, beds of violet flowers, fishermen casting nets from small boats, and silhouettes of some of the more famous land formations such as the ‘tea pot’ rock and the ‘extended middle finger’ rock.

We then drove to the Danxia Mountain to access the Sun Viewing Pavilion at the summit. Some of our group took the cable car; three of us decided to climb. It was an easy-to-moderate ascent, punctuated by some pretty steep staircases. One had a chain available for visitors to haul themselves from one step to the next. Signs displaying a phone number for “information, emergency and rescue” only added to the adventure. After about 45 minutes we reached the top, caught our breath, and took in the exhilarating views of the other Danxia landforms, all the while experiencing that endorphin-release that rewards you for your accomplishments.

At the end of the day we took the bullet train back to the Guangzhou area—about 45 minutes—

followed by a 40 minute bus ride from the train station to the hotel.



Our final day in the province took us two hours south to Kaiping Diaolou. The name “Kaiping” literally means “peaceful new area” and the attraction in this UNESCO World Heritage site is the “Zili” (self-reliance) Village which includes 92 houses and 9 watchtowers.

The buildings were constructed between 1837 and 1912 (Qing Dynasty) as homes for émigré landlords, with towers to protect their properties against roving bandits. The reinforced concrete multi-story houses (called ‘diaolou’) contain period furniture and family memorabilia, while the adjacent lands are dotted with lotus ponds. Nearby, in Li Garden there are mansions with gardens, a canal, villas, bamboo groves, bridges and walkways...ideal for sauntering, reflection and photos.

The heights of Guangdong Province provide visitors with the opportunity to breathe in the beauty of the surroundings, whether it's in Guangzhou, Danxia Mountain of Kaiping Diaolou. Moments of reflection are easily encountered in morning market smiles, tai-chi along the Pearl River, mountain walks, the sounds of frogs barking across lotus ponds and of course, talking with and learning from the locals about cuisine, customs, culture and commonalities. Guangdong deserves a place on every traveller's must-see list.



## GUANGDONG

The 600 meter tall Canton Tower in Gangzhou



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