

Beijing, China

Beijing , a fast moving, vibrant city, is filled with people going about their lives and adapting to change from inside and without. We felt no restrictions when it came to wandering about on our own. Andrea insisted on rising before dawn and walking the mile or so through the darkened streets to see the flag raising at Tienammen Gate.

Included in our itinerary were a few of the “must see” pilgrimage sites. A visit to the Temple of Heaven or Tian Tan in Beijing is a worthwhile commitment of an afternoon. It is a tranquil escape from the sensory overload that goes with any large city. Order, discipline and geometric symmetry are the unifying principles, but they are carried out with a sense of artistic proportion that is uniquely Chinese.

Approaching the circular pagoda where each year on the Winter Solstice the emperors of the Ming Dynasty (1360 -1640 AD) offered ritual sacrifice to Heaven, we paused to watch a group of middle-aged office workers and professionals standing in evenly spaced rows and columns. They were refining their calligraphy techniques, using long pointed brushes with buckets of water as ink. Their parchments were the porous paving stones of the broad promenade that rose steadily to the Temple of Heaven. Hands clasped behind his back, a wizened master, some years their senior, paced among them applying his critical eye. The students submitted to his terse commentary without expression or response.

The tranquil surroundings and formal gardens had not escaped the flourishing capitalism that, despite fifty years of repression, has filled every available niche of Beijing. Off to one side were the cluttered souvenir shops. Through the middle of it all streamed bus-loads of anxious comrades from the provinces, all engaged in hushed conversations. To minimize dispersion of the tour groups, each member was given a bright red or yellow “gimme” cap, glowing in stark contrast to grays and navy blues of their bus-wrinkled suits. The “gimme” cap and how to wear it had not reached the high art form among the Chinese that it has enjoyed in Texas. But it was a glimpse of how the Chinese approached tourism. Literally everything is geared to large travel groups; buses, restaurants, hotels and tourist attractions.

As the Temple of Heaven marks the center of the ancient empire, individuals from each tour group come to stand on the little marble disc embedded in the paving stones of the rotunda. Elderly ladies wearing dark blue pants suits and skinny, sun dried old men politely waited their turn for a quick photo. Their deeply lined and tanned faces beamed with delight. The starched bills of the “gimme” caps tilting at all angles created a light-hearted spectacle. The people of China are on the move, and they intend to see their country. I thought of farmers from Nebraska standing in front of the Lincoln memorial.