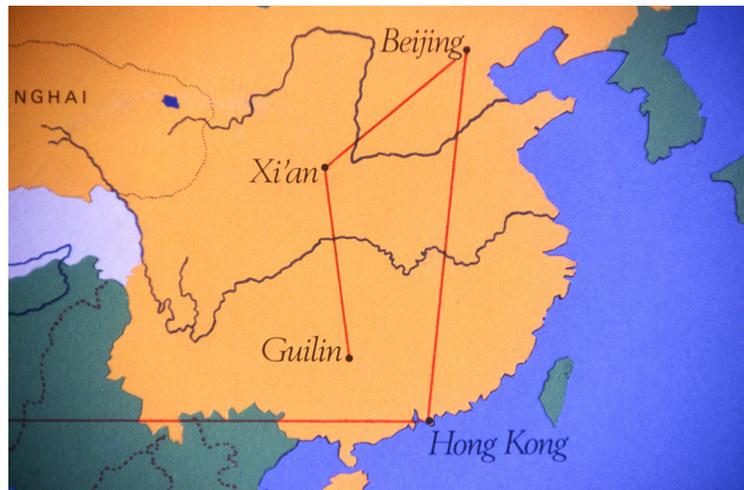


6 – GUILIN



After breakfast this morning we were collected in our minibus and driven through the town to one of the extraordinary mountains, Die Cai Shan, from which we could enjoy a fine view of the city. We climbed it slowly under the shade of trees, using steps. Although it was hot, it was not too great an effort. We stopped at a cave to admire calligraphy that had been carved around the entrance and inside (most of it was highlighted with black paint) and then, mingling with the scores of Chinese and Japanese tourists, continued upwards. As we did, the sprawling city below became more visible. The Chinese had certainly managed to destroy what must have been at one time fine scenery. Although a faint heat haze hung over the ugly city, the sun beat down from a clear blue sky.



Guilin

At last we reached the top and looked down over a dramatic view of the city and surrounding mountains. While the Japanese tourists all photographed each other against this backdrop, I screwed the telephoto lens on to my camera and took a few (unsuccessful) shots of the little fishing boats on the river far below.

Shortly afterwards we were rounded up and began our descent. Because of the number of people milling around and the heat, I did not mind leaving. As we clambered down, Ercus chatted to a French girl. We stopped at the cave and waited for Paddy, who had lost us and had come down a different way. Here Miss Liu bought soft drinks for us all, which we drank while sitting in the shade. After Paddy joined us, we moved off and returned to our bus. We now drove out of the city and into the surrounding countryside, then stopped at what looked like a park. Here we joined more tourists and walked slightly uphill in the shade of some trees until we reached a building that formed the entrance to some caves. We waited while our guides bought tickets, and a large group formed. When called, we followed the crowd into the side of a mountain. We were now conducted through a series of fantastic caverns full of colourfully lit stalagmites and stalactites. Whisked through is probably a better description, for as soon as the Chinese guide had finished talking into her loudhailer, the lights were switched off and we were plunged into darkness. The place was interesting at first, but soon the novelty wore off and I began to find the tour rather boring. The Chinese and Japanese tourists kept running into various nooks and crannies to have their photographs taken.

At last we completed the tour and emerged from the caves. We now walked back to our bus and were driven to our hotel, where we had an indifferent lunch in the dining room. As we were free until three o'clock, most of us used the time to have a siesta. We had been given this extra time because of the heat. Certainly Mr Wang and Miss Liu were feeling the effects of the humidity.

I lay down on my bed and slept soundly for about an hour. I then freshened myself up and wrote my diary for a while. At three o'clock we assembled in the lobby and set off again in the bus. This time we drove to a park, where we got out and walked a short distance in the shade to a small zoo, which was not very impressive. Here we went in search of pandas. We saw a red panda first and eventually found a young black-and-white giant panda sitting lethargically in a corner of its cage, panting heavily. As the poor animal obviously could not cope with the heat here, I felt sorry for it. This was the first time that I had ever set eyes on a real giant panda; the experience was something of an anti-climax, having seen so many photographs and films of pandas in the wild. Because it was so dark and there were bars in the way, I did not attempt to take any photographs.

After a little while we drifted off, stopping to look at some of the other animals, including monkeys. We also saw a curled up python. We then made our way over to another part of the park, where we stopped to admire a tall rock that looked vaguely like a camel. The Japanese tourists all went mad with their cameras at this spot. We then wandered through a series of small gardens where bonsai trees (*pensai* in Chinese) were displayed against horrible concrete walls. It was not a patch on Japanese artistry. I unenthusiastically wandered around here until I caught up with the others at a tea room overlooking a rather unremarkable lake. Everything looked too grotty and gaudy here. We sat down to rest and sip tea while I eyed a ravishing girl dressed in black, who was obviously very conscious of her beauty, and was sitting with her boyfriend and chatting to a smiling elderly man. Later she and her boyfriend excused themselves and crossed to the other side of the lake, where the boy began taking photos of her as she posed beside trees and rocks.

After a while we left the tea room, walked through some more unremarkable courtyards and gardens, and returned to the rock that resembled a camel. We now clambered aboard the bus and were driven back to the hotel. On the way we stopped by the river to view another famous rock. Here we were accosted by beggars, who were shooed away by our guides. This was a popular beauty spot, with moored pleasure boats and fishing cormorants perched on them. Back at the hotel we relaxed before assembling again for dinner. I did not eat too much, for I found many of the dishes here too hot and spicy for my liking.

After dinner, Ercus and I decided to go out for a walk. Although it was dark by now, it was still quite hot. On our way out of the hotel grounds we noticed that a disco was in full swing in a hall on the left, and we decided to go in just for the hell of it. I was surprised that we were allowed in, since there only seemed to be Chinese people inside. We were charged ¥3 each for a ticket – foreigners' price, I guessed, for no Chinese teenager would be able to afford that amount. Anyhow, in we went and found the dance floor alive with youngsters bopping about to Western-sounding disco music. We just wandered around, watching the dancers and eyeing the girls. Some of them were very slim and very attractive. Many of them wore hot pants, which seemed to be very much in fashion here.

Very soon the disco music stopped and everyone sat down. We noticed that there were very few single girls or fellows in the hall, as most of them were couples. We sat down beside two couples to see what would happen next. A band appeared on the stage, almost in darkness, and began to play the most dreadful music that we had ever heard. There was hardly any harmony and the melodies were shapeless. The chap on the electronic organ only played with one hand. As the music was slow and 'romantic', the young

people responded by doing formal dances with set steps, almost like ballroom dancing. As neither of us knew the steps and hadn't the nerve to ask a girl to dance, we stuck this out for a couple of 'numbers' and finally left.

We now skirted the lake, firmly resisting offers of rides in pedicabs, and made for the ill-lit streets. Here we passed all manner of people and houses, and paused to look at people eating at their doorsteps or out in the streets. Some of the houses were just wooden shacks on the pavements. The people showed no interest in us and displayed no signs of friendliness. Doubtless they were all sick of tourists!

We also wandered into shops, both big and small. Ercus was looking for a large, sturdy bag, into which he could put various things, but he found nothing to his satisfaction. We walked around a couple of big stores, examining the goods and the prices. Most things were cheap by our standards, but imported goods, such as television sets, were prohibitively expensive.

In another street we turned off by a river and found ourselves in a very touristy area, where there were souvenir stalls selling ghastly 'jade' seals and other junk. Almost every stallholder invited us, in English, to buy or look at something. We quickly retraced our steps and returned to the street, where we found a good bookshop that sold some publications in English. Ercus looked at a book and set of tapes for learning English, but as the shop was about to close, we left and walked on.

Passing some little restaurants, we turned up a street in an effort to return to our starting point and from there to our hotel, but got lost. We asked for directions and eventually managed to make our way back, stopping briefly to watch a dreadful America film, a musical, being shown at the back of another hotel. The Chinese lads at the gate seemed riveted to the screen on seeing the main actress, who was wearing a tight bathing suit.

Back at our hotel complex, we entered another building and went up to the disco there, but there was nobody in it. After viewing the city from a rooftop garden, we made our way back to our building, passing the original disco, which was still in full swing. I wrote my diary before retiring to bed early. It had been a pleasant enough day.

This morning we assembled for today's trip along the Li River. This was something that all of us were looking forward to, having heard so much about the extraordinary mountains to be seen while sailing down the river. Undoubtedly this would be the highlight of the tour. We met our guides in the hotel lobby and set off in the bus for the forty-five minute drive to a pier by the river. Why we did not board a boat here in Guilin was not clear; perhaps the good scenery did not start until later in the journey. Certainly

we saw little of interest from the bus as we whizzed along the roads; as certain people had not shown up on time, we had left late.

At last we reached the river and, passing more souvenir stalls where I saw the type of umbrellas that I wanted to buy, but now had no time to do so, we clambered aboard one of the many boats that had been lashed together. Although it looked comfortable enough, it was full of tourists. We were brought upstairs and given a table indoors at the front, on the shady side of the boat. I was hoping that we would be taken in a smaller and more traditional type of boat, but no such luck! Although the boat was full of American and Japanese tourists, there were also well-dressed Chinese people who were speaking Mandarin Chinese – perhaps they were from Taiwan. While we waited for the boat to start (there was a considerable delay), we sipped tea and nibbled sesame cakes and preserved plums.

At last the other boats moved off, leaving ours free to move. We were surprised to discover that a tug was pulling us, unlike the other boats. Either our motor was out of action or it was a way of making the journey quieter. Naturally we could hear the tug in the distance, but it was not as noisy as having our own motor shuddering continually.



Li River, Guilin

The boat wheeled right around and we started our journey along the famous river. It was pleasantly hot and sunny, with the added advantage of a fresh breeze, but it was quite hazy. I couldn't make up my mind whether this improved the scenery or not. The first part of the journey was a little uninteresting until we left the little town behind and the astonishing spiky mountains began to appear. Out came the cameras, including mine, and we happily snapped shots of the views. Every twist in the river brought a new and more amazing vista into sight. The boat had to negotiate rapids and shallow spots, which were signalled by blasts from the tug. Every now and then we would pass tiny fishing boats, water buffalo, and people wading into the water to catch fish. The only thing that marred our view was the constant

sight of the tug in front, belching forth thick black smoke. Occasionally we saw other boats ahead, but more often than not we had a clear view of the river and mountains.



Li River, Guilin

Although the scenery did look very dramatic (and most unusual), it did not quite look like the photographs that we had seen of it in many publications. Undoubtedly this was because professional photographers had taken their shots when the scenery was at its best. Nonetheless, everyone was delighted by what they saw. I, like the rest of the people on board, took many photographs at every bend of the river. True to form however, both the Chinese and Japanese tourists took photos of each other, using the river and mountains as a backdrop. A German tourist, who had a Chinese lady guide with him constantly, barged through to take his photographs using a rather antiquated still camera. We had seen the man in our hotel in Guilin, accompanied by the Chinese lady. He spoke to us once or twice and praised the scenery.

The boat travelled at a good pace, not too slow and not too fast, but we had to be quick about framing our pictures. I lost several good compositions by not being quick enough. The novelty of the wonderful scenery lasted most of the morning; I moved constantly from one part of the boat to another. However, when the tables were cleared for lunch at around midday, the scenery became less spectacular. The only thing of interest was a little traditional village that we passed, which contained tiny shacks built of wood and matting. It looked like something out of a classical Chinese painting.

We then sat down to an excellent meal, the main dish of which consisted of fish freshly caught and delivered to the boat. It turned out that the crew had not received enough fish and that we were the last table to be served with it. We passed some to our guides at the next table but, as they did not seem to want it, I made short work of it.

After the meal I spruced myself up, then gazed out at the view; by now it was less dramatic as the mountains were not so high. It now turned cloudy.

We arrived at our destination, Yangshuo, at about two o'clock, but it was half past the hour by the time we had turned right around and docked. By now the sky was black and it was spilling rain. We were all dreading getting out! Fortunately it was not too bad, for we did not have far to go and we were able to shelter under some trees. When we passed more souvenir stalls, I kept my eye out for Chinese umbrellas, but none were to be seen here.

Our bus quickly appeared and we hopped on board. We then had to wait for Miss Liu, who had stopped to buy a model of a traditional boat for just one yuan. I thought that it was a heap of rubbish, but she was delighted with it.

We then set off on our way back to Guilin by driving out of the scruffy little town and taking a straight road through the countryside. It was a relief to leave the tourist spots behind and travel through rural China. Despite the usual modern intrusions, such as telegraph poles and power cables, time

seemed to have stopped here. Workers in coolie hats toiled in the paddy fields. Their houses were small and built in traditional style, and in the distance the dreamlike mountains rose abruptly from the flat landscape. Everything was green except for the red, muddy soil.

It rained on and off as we travelled. Suddenly we drove into a torrential burst of rain that cascaded down from a huge, black cloud – we had never seen anything like this before. It beat against the windows and the road turned into a river. Outside, people who had been taken by surprise hastily sought shelter, but there was nowhere to go. We were lucky to have the luxury of the bus; I pitied the unfortunate people outside.

All of a sudden we were out of the rain. The sky above us cleared, a patch of blue appeared, and it remained dry for the rest of the journey. Beyond a certain point, it seemed not to have rained at all. I gazed out at the changing scenery until we reached the ugly outskirts of Guilin.

As we approached our hotel, our local guide hopped out at a CITS booking office to see if he could get tickets for this evening's acrobatic show, but returned empty-handed. Our guides had tried to arrange some entertainment for us yesterday evening, but tickets could not be obtained. Although we were told that we would have another free evening, Mr Wang said that he would see what he could do.

Back at the hotel, Ercus and I wandered through a large executive suite beside our room. It must have been designed for government officials, as there were at least four large rooms, the most impressive of which was the bathroom. The décor in the other rooms was quite over the top and very vulgar. We were surprised to discover that the door had been left open and that we could wander around freely. It certainly was an eye-opener.

After we had spruced ourselves up, we appeared in the dining room at six for dinner. Mr Wang had good news for us: he had managed to procure six seats for the acrobatic show, which would start at 7.20 p.m. He asked us to be ready by ten to seven.

We duly appeared at the lobby at the appointed time and set off on foot with Mr Wang and Miss Liu. We skirted the lake, then swung round to the right, keeping by a second lake, and then on straight. As there had been a power cut at the hotel during dinner, I wondered if there would be electricity at the theatre. However, we noticed that there was power in most of the little dwellings nearby. Nonetheless, when we arrived at the theatre (we identified it by all the tourist coaches parked outside), we found a large crowd gathered outside and the place plunged into darkness. We joined the crowd and Mr Wang went to the entrance to see what was happening. Apparently there was a fault with one of the local generators and people were being asked to wait while it was being fixed. Ercus and I walked around the nearby streets to kill time. When we returned to the theatre, Miss Liu

and the Brennans decided to walk back to the hotel, even though it was probably still in darkness. The rest of us decided to hang on for another while. As the foyer had been lit with candles, we were able to go in and look at some things for sale. A girl offered us a tiny abacus for ¥80, but was willing to bargain. Thinking that she had said eight, we offered her three. When we realized what she meant, we said, 'No thanks' and left her. However, she was not to be deterred and did not leave us alone until we decided to walk back to the hotel as everyone else was leaving by now. The last of the coaches departed and we set off, following Mr Wang. This time we took a different route down a badly-lit street, avoiding potholes and bicycles, and passed through an old city gate. As there was not enough light to read the inscription carved on the stone, Mr Wang asked a man on the street about it. The man was able to tell us that the gate was built in a certain dynasty, with various parts added in later dynasties. By examining the archway that we walked through, which was more like a tunnel, we could see different types of brickwork done at different periods. Surprised by the man's knowledge, we wondered if the ordinary man in the street in Dublin would be able to give a visitor the history of a particular building.

We now found ourselves at the first lake and so it was only a short walk back to our hotel. Just as we approached it, the lights came on – perfect timing! Inside, we joined Pauline and Pat in their room for a drink and a chat, and then invited Mr Wang to join us. As usual, we had a very interesting conversation with him. The more I spoke to him the more I liked him; he certainly was a most cultivated man.

He stayed with us for a good while, then excused himself, saying that he should let us pack for the morning, as we would be flying to Guangzhou (Canton). Ercus and I returned to our room to do this and we finally went to bed. It had been an interesting day.