

## 9 – CHENGDU

Friday, 26 May

When I woke up shortly after six o'clock for my flight to Chengdu, I felt very ill. I had to dash to the loo, where I found that I had diarrhoea for the fourth time. This time, however, it was much worse, for I also experienced terrible dizziness and nausea. I collapsed back on to my bed, gasping aloud. The American and Japanese lads spoke to me, offering help and sympathy. As I felt too ill to walk down to the CAAC office for the seven o'clock airport bus, I simply lay down and rested until I felt a little better.

When I eventually left the hotel, I met Sophie and two fellows, and walked with them until we found a people-carrier taxi. I bargained with the driver and got the ¥50 fare that he was demanding down to ¥30, and off we drove. En route we stopped at a hotel to pick up an English man and, shortly afterwards, his wife, who was elsewhere. Fortunately I was able to lie down on the back seat.

As I still felt very weak on arrival at the airport, the driver kindly carried my rucksack inside. As I could see no check-in desk for Chengdu, I asked a lady at the security X-ray machine. She said something to me in Chinese that I could not understand. She then told me to sit down and wait, went off and returned with a man on crutches who explained to me, in English, that the flight had been delayed until the following day. I was dumbfounded to hear this. I was then offered accommodation in the airport hotel and the services of a doctor; I accepted just the first. The lady went off again and returned with two complimentary slips: one for accommodation and the other for breakfast in the restaurant. She told me where to find the hotel.

At the hotel, which seemed to be quite large, I was told that no rooms were now available. Cursing and swearing, I left and met Sophie outside. Her flight had been delayed too, but at least not for one day! I hailed another taxi and off I set for the Hongshan Hotel once again, paying another ¥30.

Back at the hotel I managed to secure my original bed and lay down to rest. As before, I felt very groggy and spent most of the day sleeping. I took some medication and, from time to time, chatted to a rather strange, though friendly, French chap who seemed to spend most of his time smoking joints. He told me that he was able to get hashish at the post office. Apparently the Chinese did not use it, but knew that the foreigners wanted it.

The day passed slowly and I began to feel a little better in the evening, though I was still rather weak. Later I made my way to the nearby restaurant for something to eat. Naturally, the friendly waiter was surprised to see me again. I had a meal of rice and egg with the English couple who had been in the taxi this morning and a rather wild-looking chap from Alaska. We relaxed over the meal and had quite an interesting conversation. I just ate a small portion of my food and afterwards had a banana, which I had bought earlier.

Afterwards we ambled back to our hotel, where I prepared for the morning and went to bed early.



Saturday, 27 May

I rose at six this morning and, feeling a good deal better, washed and set off for the official CAAC office on foot. After a short wait I boarded the official airport bus and, for just ¥1.50, travelled to the airport. Because I was one of the first in the queue, it did not take long to check in. In the waiting room I wrote a little of my diary, then joined the queue for the security check. Afterwards I bought some fruit juice and then bumped into the two English girls whom I had met when leaving Tian Chi and unfortunately had not seen the previous morning. As they were also bound for Chengdu and had been told that the flight would be delayed until today, they had been taken off in a special bus to a hotel, with the compliments of CAAC. The girls reported that the hotel had turned out to be a very good place. My late arrival at the airport yesterday had resulted in me missing out on this.

We did not have too long to wait; we boarded the plane soon after nine o'clock and it took off half an hour later. I managed to sit with the two girls, Valerie and Margaret, and chatted to them during the uneventful journey. Later we were given a meal; as it consisted of bread, chicken, a dessert and

biscuits, I ate nearly everything. Afterwards I wrote more of my diary, read a little and fell asleep.

I was woken by an announcement informing us that we would be landing in twenty minutes. We dropped down through the thick layer of cloud and flew over green and lush paddy fields before landing at the familiar airport. Although I had informed my friends here about the date and time of my arrival, there was no sign of any familiar faces in the airport building. We collected our luggage, which by now had become filthy dirty and, pushing aside the bothersome taxi drivers offering transport, found the crowded bus bound for the Jinjiang Hotel. It took some time to get into the city centre – I had forgotten how long the journey took. As the Traffic Hotel was just a short walk away, we decided to stay at the Jinjiang for at least one night and then get ourselves sorted.



*The Jinjiang Hotel, Chengdu*

Surprisingly, the price for a room with three beds was the same as it had been two years ago: ¥25 each. The hotel looked quite unchanged. We were led to a smart room at the back, similar to the one in which I had previously stayed. The girls were delighted with the luxury of the place and the affordable price. I was very glad of the relative comfort after the cheap and nasty hotel in Ürümqi, with its unbearable noise and discomfort.

After we had spruced ourselves up, we went down to the lobby. While the girls enquired about train times, I tried to telephone two of the girls I knew. I had to get the help of the cashier, who was extremely inefficient. It was a long and complicated procedure; the end result was that Liu Jingjing, who had invited me to stay in her apartment, was not at her workplace and the other girl, Miss Li, did not seem to exist.

We then cashed some traveller's cheques and wandered out and along the Jinjiang river in order to find something to eat. We ended up at a new

and very clean little restaurant run by a chap who called himself John; he spoke very good English and told us that he organized tourist trips in the area. Another Chinese fellow chatted with us for a while. Also present in the restaurant was a pleasant girl, whose English was excellent and who had a lot of interesting things to say; she told us that she had brought a group of tourists to Tibet the previous year and had enjoyed the trip. The English girls enjoyed some yogurt and fruit here, but I just nibbled a little rice, which tasted horrible on its own, and drank some tea.



*The Jinjiang Restaurant, by the Jinjiang River, Chengdu*

After our snack we left and had a look at the Traffic Hotel, which was typically Chinese and scruffy; beds in a triple room cost ¥10 each per night. We then strolled along some narrow streets, where we saw various markets. Although they were interesting to see, I lacked the energy to walk and concentrate. Fortunately we did not venture too far and soon turned back.

In the hotel once again, I wrote three short letters to the Chengdu girls and tried to post them, but I found the post office closed. I then went to the hotel doctor, where I was given medication for giardia, which I now realized I had, for shortly after we arrived I noticed the familiar horrible taste in my mouth and other symptoms, such as frequent belching.

Later, when the girls had finished in the bathroom, I had a welcome shower. Feeling somewhat better, I returned to my room and the girls went out for a meal. When looking in my medicine box later, I discovered that I had brought tablets for giardia – I had completely forgotten about them!

I whiled away the rest of the evening watching the news on television, reading to the sound of Dvořák's Cello Concerto on the radio (which was quite a surprise!) and writing my diary.

The girls returned later after having a heated discussion about something when they were out and about, blew off a little steam and settled down. I read my book while Margaret wrote her diary, then later went to sleep.

Sunday, 28 May

After a good night's sleep we all lay on in bed until about ten o'clock, and only then got up. What luxury! Like me, the girls had come here to relax. After I had breakfasted on the dry and rather peculiar bread that the girls had bought for me the previous evening, I washed, got together some clothes to be cleaned, and then went downstairs. I now posted my letters and bought some postcards. I wandered over to a restaurant by the river and there spent the rest of the morning writing the last of my post. I was glad to get it out of the way. I then lunched on a small bowl of noodles with a little chicken – not bad.



*Relaxing by the Jinjiang River, Chengdu*

Back at the hotel I sent off the postcards, took a second dose of pills for the day, then slowly walked up to the People's Park, passing all the familiar sights: paintings for sale at the side of the road, shops, department stores, touristy 'antique' shops, and restaurants. I popped into the large Xinhua bookshop to take a look around.

I soon reached the entrance to the park, bought a ticket and wandered in. I found the teahouse easily enough, but saw no familiar faces. As I was by now in need of a cool drink, I bought a carton of orange juice at a stall, then sat on a stone bench by the lake, talking to a man as best as I could in Chinese. Later I made my way to the teahouse and ordered some tea. I was not long seated when a young man sat down beside me, leaving his girlfriend on her own, and began talking to me in poor English. When his girlfriend returned from the loo, I invited her to sit down and reluctantly she did so. As she had not been practising her English, I spoke to her in Chinese.

While we chatted, I saw the elderly man, whom I had seen two years previously, wandering around with his ear-cleaning equipment. A mad woman, who looked vaguely Tibetan, cursed loudly when a lady who was putting away some chairs accidentally hit her. We had a good laugh at this.

We then left, having exchanged addresses, and I walked back towards the hotel, stopping for a longer look in the bookshop. I bought a little book for just ¥0.90 entitled *English or Chinglish?*, which looked interesting. Shortly afterwards I passed some Tibetans who were sitting on the pavement, selling some very unusual-looking traditional medications. I then crossed the river to one of the little restaurants, where I joined two Swiss girls. I did not know what to eat, but finally decided on toast and a boiled egg. The toast had been fried and tasted quite horrible. I chatted to the girls for a while and later went over to the bar. The inevitable happened: two lads sat down beside me and began a conversation in English. Later we were joined by a lawyer, who spoke good English, and his girlfriend, a teacher, who spoke just a little. We chatted until about 11.30 and finally broke up. The two lads asked if they could meet me again on the following evening.

I returned to the hotel to find Valerie asleep and Margaret, wearing a flimsy tee shirt and little else, writing her diary. I took some more pills, washed my teeth, wrote my diary, and finally went to bed.

Monday, 29 May

Up late again; like me, the girls were in no hurry. After I had showered and washed some clothing, I eventually wandered off to a nearby restaurant, where I had a lunch of dumplings and noodles. I joined a girl from Yugoslavia, her American husband, and a Chinese girl and lad who both spoke good English. We spent most of the afternoon together, chatting about this and that. I thought that the Chinese people were a couple, but

they were not. The girl was nineteen and was studying English at the university here; later we exchanged addresses. At about five o'clock I returned to the hotel to take the last of my pills and rested. By now the English girls were back and I chatted to them.

Later I went out again and dined on rice with a dish of pork and green beans, which turned out to be peas cooked in a sauce made of pork. I used this dish to add some flavour to the rice. While I ate, a group of young Dutch people arrived and argued long and loud with the owner of the restaurant, who had promised them train tickets this evening, but had not managed to procure them. The scenario looked and sounded quite familiar!

I then wandered over to the bar, where I ordered a glass of juice with some fruit in it. I was invited to join a group of young people who had a guitar, and was asked to play it. I obliged with a song or two. Although some of the people spoke quite good English, they did not pester me, and chatted among themselves in Chinese. One fellow, who only had one leg, was quite a character and made everyone laugh by imitating various regional dialects and local styles of singing. Unfortunately, I was unable to understand the jokes.

I spent the rest of the evening with these young people and eventually returned to the hotel to sleep.

Tuesday, 30th May

Up late again. After I had eaten a makeshift breakfast, washed and dressed, I sauntered out, sat down at the first restaurant by the river and asked for a cup of tea. As the girl who served me spoke English and had little to do, she sat down with me and we spent the morning chatting. A pleasant young lady, she had just graduated from university after a two-year course in English, which she now spoke quite well.

Later I ordered something to eat and had a fairly decent meal. Valerie and Margaret joined me briefly and we returned to our hotel so that they could get into their room in order to pack and leave. They were to catch a train to Kunming this evening, and from there would fly to Bangkok. I wished that I had their energy! We now said goodbye and I thanked them for their various kindnesses.

When they left, I began to feel quite alone and bored. I whiled away most of the afternoon in my room, sleeping, watching nothing in particular on television, and reading. By now I wished that I could leave this dreary city and go home; I had had enough by now. The fact that I still had not managed to contact the friends that I had met two years previously was beginning to annoy me.

I went out later and sat down in the second restaurant by the river, where I ordered a soft drink and later some food. I was then invited to join the

gang that I had met on the previous evening. We had a good meal together and shared our food. After the meal my pals went over to the bar; I returned to the hotel to take my giardia pill and wash my teeth. I then rejoined the young people at the bar and also Valerie and Margaret, who had not yet left. We laughed and chatted together until most of the young people went off to go dancing somewhere. I then joined a group at the next table and talked to them in English. These people spoke excellently, especially a young well-dressed lady who was sitting beside me. It turned out that she worked as a translator in the Jinjiang Hotel. We invited the English girls over to join us; they chatted and left after a while. The young lady from the hotel opened up and told me her forthright views about the country and the government, which she described as very corrupt.

Later I was brought to the nearby English Corner, which turned out to be in a different location than what I had imagined. Here, a large group of students were standing and talking animatedly to each other in English. I was suddenly sucked into this mass of young people, who immediately surrounded me and began to ask questions. One young fellow with spectacles expounded at length on the student demonstrations in Beijing and complained about the corruption in high places. I was asked to explain how democracy worked in my part of the world. Although I gave them a simplified description of how our government functioned and how ordinary people were allowed to vote for politicians, I felt that my listeners could not fully comprehend how things were done in the West. One fellow declared that he was so fed up with the corruption in China that he 'wanted to turn to religion'. The chap with the spectacles then asked me why I liked to travel abroad and what made Westerners want to travel. He told me that he could not imagine travelling to another country without being homesick and missing his usual food. I was quite struck by the students' airing of their outspoken views and later wondered if there might have been a plain-clothes policeman in their midst.

As it was becoming late by now, the young people began to leave. Any hope I had of seeing familiar faces was dashed once again. I lingered, talked to a few people and then made to leave. However, I was stopped by a man who turned out to be Mr Ai – one of the teachers in the school where I had given the English lesson two years previously. He now asked me if I would do the same on Friday evening at 7.30. I unhesitatingly agreed to this and wrote down some details.

Back in the hotel I read a little, then went to bed.

Wednesday, 31 May

This morning I was woken at about 8.30 by a ring on the doorbell – it was a member of the staff with a thermos flask of boiled water. I thanked him, fell back on to the bed, but eventually got up and had some tea and biscuits by way of breakfast. During the morning I trimmed my beard, had a shower, handed in a pair of trousers to be cleaned, and washed some other clothing in my room. Later I went down to the lobby and tried to ring Liu Jingjing again. This time I managed to get through to her office and I was told that she was coming, but nobody came. Eventually the phone was cut off. I gave up, paid for yet another night, then walked over to the CAAC office, where I was told that a flight to Beijing would cost me ¥411. However, I discovered that if I wanted to fly to Hong Kong, I would need to go to the Jinjiang Hotel! I returned and spoke to a girl in the CITS office, who told me that it would cost me ¥665 to fly to Hong Kong.

When I returned to my room, there was a knock on the door and an American fellow came in. His name was John and he had just arrived. Like me, he was sick with a stomach disorder. Later I went out for something to eat and had a very indifferent meal in one of the riverside restaurants. A French group of people, who were eating there, were not at all impressed by the local version of French fries that they had been given, and gave the manager a lecture on how they should be prepared. I felt sorry for the poor man.

When I returned to the hotel later, I found a note stuck on the door. Miraculously it was from Liu Jingjing; it informed me that she would visit me at eight o'clock this evening. This I considered to be another reminder to me: never try to rush things in China!

After I had taken my pill and washed my teeth, I began to write yesterday's diary. John came in and we chatted a little; it turned out that he had a pal, who would be arriving later. After I had finished writing, I walked to the first restaurant by the river, ordered tea and spent the rest of the afternoon chatting to Miss Hu, the waitress. I fetched the photographs that I had taken at home and showed them to her. We then exchanged addresses.

Later three young English people, a girl and two boys, joined me and together we had our evening meal, which was not too bad.

I paid up, left soon after 7.30, and met Liu Jingjing at the hotel gate. At first we did not recognize each other. She was beautifully dressed; her hair, newly washed and styled in a simple manner, looked really beautiful. She carried herself excellently and I could see that she was a cut above the rest – no wonder I had been so taken with her two years previously. I was surprised to discover that she was allowed to come into the hotel and go up to my room. As we had the place to ourselves, we had a long chat together. She presented me with a pretty fan depicting a duck and drake swimming in a

river. (Later I learned, much to my surprise, that here this was considered to be symbolism of a highly romantic kind: the sort of gift normally given to a newly-married couple. The fact that a married lady had given me such a present seemed very strange indeed.) Miss Liu (Chinese women retain their maiden names and there is no equivalent of 'Mrs') then gave me a packet of handkerchiefs for my mother. In return, I gave her some embroidered Irish handkerchiefs. During our conversation, she made me understand that I should be careful when dealing with one of her colleagues in the newspaper office where she worked (Miss Li, to whom I had sent a telegram from Ürümqi) because of something that she had done in the past.

We left just as the two American fellows were returning, and we walked along the street together, looking at the paintings and souvenirs for sale. After a while we returned to the hotel, where Miss Liu collected her bicycle. She promised to ring at ten in the morning about arrangements to stay in her apartment and cycled off.

I then wandered over to the bar and joined the same group of young people that I had been with the previous evening. Also present was a Swedish girl named Åsa and an English lad of Egyptian origin named Hamdi. I stayed chatting to them for a while, then returned to the hotel and went to bed.

Thursday, 1 June

Having slept long and well, I had my usual makeshift breakfast, then went downstairs to the hotel shop to see if there was anything I could buy for Miss Liu's husband and brother. As everything was expensive and as there was very little on offer for men, I walked up the street and stopped at a shop that I had visited yesterday evening with Miss Liu. Here I bought two ornate silk ties at ¥18 RMB apiece. I then ambled along a narrow back street (where, I think, I had tried to eat the Sichuan hotpot two years previously) and, after a long search, eventually managed to buy a couple of felt-tipped markers as mine were on their way out. I found the little shops here fascinating. It was good to feel a little more energetic today.

I returned to the hotel with my purchases and then went out again with my camera to take a few shots. There were lots of colourfully-dressed children about, and soon I learned that it was Children's Day. There was a real holiday feel about the city.

I then made my way to the first restaurant, joining some English ladies and their children, and had a reasonably good lunch while chatting to them. After they had gone, I spoke to my young friend Miss Hu, the waitress. She proposed that, after she had finished work at three o'clock, we go to the bar for a drink. However, her brother appeared on the scene and that was that. Instead I talked to her colleague, who was now starting work. The boss then

gave me a free bottle of orangeade, which tasted horrible. Earlier I had been given a can of imported pineapple juice, which had knocked me back ¥7.

I left at about half past four, went to my room to collect my things, and at five o'clock precisely Miss Liu's husband and brother arrived and rang the bell. Both men were very pleasant; the husband spoke a few words of English and the brother spoke the language well. We chatted for a while and set off on two bicycles: I sat on the carrier behind the husband and the brother wore my rucksack. We travelled through back streets in an effort to avoid the police; when approaching a main junction, we dismounted and walked – presumably because pillion passengers were not permitted here.

We finally arrived at a rather dreary-looking complex of scruffy apartment blocks, and I was led up a pitch-black staircase to an astonishingly bright, clean and modern apartment, which was in complete contrast to everything around it. I suspected that they had been redecorating it while I had been waiting in the hotel. Miss Liu greeted me kindly and while I sat in the small living room, sipping tea and lychee juice, and looking at a stamp collection with her brother, she and her husband disappeared in order to prepare a meal. The banquet that was put before us was embarrassingly extravagant and I realized that these people were moving Heaven and earth to put me at my ease. Miss Liu and her grandmother, who had by now joined us, ate practically nothing; we men helped ourselves and I was constantly encouraged to eat more. While it was wonderful to be here, I now wished that this arrangement had never been made.

After the meal we relaxed and watched television. The brother left later and then a cousin of Miss Liu arrived. She was in poor health and had no proper job. Later a young couple arrived and had a look around.



*The bedroom*

When they left, I was shown into the one and only very neat bedroom, and was horrified to discover that the couple were about to surrender their double bed to me and sleep elsewhere. I protested, saying that I could sleep

on their couch in the sitting room next door, but they would not hear of it. They wanted me to take a bath in a relation's house nearby, but the relation was not at home. I washed briefly with some hot water that they provided and later retired to their bedroom. Miss Liu went off to sleep in her grandmother's apartment, and her husband went to his brother's house. Looking around the bedroom, I espied a magazine that seemed to have been deliberately left in an obvious place for my perusal; on the cover was a picture of a naked European lady lying on a bed, with the naughty bits hidden from view by superimposed rose petals. As I was tired, I just read for a little while and soon fell asleep on the comfortable bed.