

The Telegraph

China: A Christmas trip to the cities of the future

Ed Victor headed East hoping for a mistletoe-free Christmas, but could he really avoid the festive spirit?



Anyone who walks the wall is a hero, especially in the snow

By Ed Victor

8:00AM GMT 21 Nov 2010

Silly me. I foolishly thought that if I took my family on holiday to China, I would escape Christmas. But my futile attempt to avoid all the sop and sentimentality fell at the first hurdle. The Chinese are just too commercially adept to skip this opportunity. "Merry Christmas" decorations and gaudy trees were all over Hong Kong, the first stop on our Chinese adventure.

We had last visited in the early Eighties and then, as now, stayed at the Mandarin Oriental. The MO service was something I remembered from that first trip – you had only to think about something you wanted and someone was at the door with it. Happily, that was still the case. We also had the best Chinese meal of our entire trip at the Man Wah restaurant. Fabulous food and great views of Hong Kong at night.

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[Coté Cour, Beijing \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hotels/asiahotels/7922245/Cote-Cour-Beijing-hotel-review.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hotels/asiahotels/7922245/Cote-Cour-Beijing-hotel-review.html)

[Duge Courtyard Hotel, Beijing \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hotels/asiahotels/7922249/Duge-Courtyard-Hotel-Beijing-hotel-review.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hotels/asiahotels/7922249/Duge-Courtyard-Hotel-Beijing-hotel-review.html)

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[China's great leap forward \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/china/7992230/Chinas-great-leap-forward.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/china/7992230/Chinas-great-leap-forward.html)

Next day we zipped around the city in various ways: by escalator to Soho to see contemporary Chinese art; by cable car to The Peak District for the spectacular views; by a hired boat to see the fishermen's houseboats in Aberdeen; by Star Ferry to Kowloon; by subway to the bird and flower market; and by taxi to Hollywood Road to look at antiques.

Hong Kong is well known, of course, Hainan Island, next on our itinerary, less so. The Chinese call it "the Hawaii of China". After seeing the high-rise hotels and apartment buildings of Sanya, its main attraction, I preferred to call it "the Miami of China". Ninety minutes' flight south of Hong Kong, the island's forest-covered mountains descend gently to palm-fringed beaches bordering a blue South China Sea. The temperature

in late December was a balmy 77F (25C) and it was sunny over Christmas week.

Again we plumped for the Mandarin Oriental Hotel and Spa on Coral Bay, just outside Sanya. Three hundred guests enjoy the total attention of 700 staff – one of the benefits to Western visitors of the Chinese policy of full employment. The hotel extends across 30 acres of beautiful ocean-front property, with a series of low-rise buildings, a gorgeous spa, five restaurants (Fresh was our favourite), three pools, gyms, tennis courts and plenty more. Happily for us, a family of avid golfers, there are 15 golf courses on the island, with many more planned. We played at four courses, all beautifully laid out and maintained.

At the moment Hainan is meant for rich Chinese (of whom there are now many) from cold northern cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Nanjing. It provides a getaway in winter to the Tropics with only a three-hour flight. But direct flights to Sanya from Europe and the United States can't be far away and, when that happens, I predict it will become a major visitor destination.

We then flew (in two and a half hours) from Sanya to Shanghai, which is, quite simply, fabulous. I had, of course, heard about the warp-speed development of China, but even so I was unprepared for the sheer size, scale, beauty and grandeur of this city on steroids. The architecture comprises what has to be the most spectacular collection of high concept skyscrapers on Earth. These amazing buildings sprout on both sides of the river. The east side, Pudong, with its proliferation of high-rise buildings, was, I am told, farm land only 20 years ago. The west side is what we think of as old Shanghai, including the famous Bund along the riverfront.

We were thrilled to find that the building we thought was the coolest of all happened to be our hotel, the Park Hyatt, which occupies the top floors of the tallest building in China. The hotel is super sleek, full of hip, happy Chinese having a great time. We spent a wonderful New Year's Eve at the "highest bar in the world" on the 92nd floor.

Not to be missed is the Shanghai Museum, which beautifully displays the art and artefacts of 5,000 years of Chinese civilisation. It is sobering and salutary to think that, when we were daubing ourselves with mud, they were creating exquisite porcelain and beautiful bronze sculptures.

Also not to be missed are the many great restaurants packed into a city that prides itself on its cuisine. Our favourite was Mr & Mrs Bund, an Asian fusion restaurant presided over by the French chef Paul Pairet, which features a unique machine that dispenses tasting portions, half or full glasses from open bottles of fine wines.

Also wonderful was Fu, which is situated in an old warlord's mansion and serves excellent Shanghai smoked fish.

On New Year's Day we flew to Beijing and another superb Hyatt hotel. At last – no signs of Christmas. The city is vast and oozes seriousness. It is Washington DC to Shanghai's New York.

With only two days at our disposal, we had to be avid tourists. On the first day, we visited three great sites: the Ming Tombs, the Summer Palace and the Great Wall. We walked along a stretch of the last or, more accurately, slipped and slid along it as snow had fallen and the Wall is very hilly. The sky in the mountains was a bright blue but the day was perilously cold. We were pleased to learn that anyone who walks the wall is a hero. We certainly felt heroic.

On we went to the lovely, lakeside Summer Palace, where emperors and their courts went to escape the heat and humidity of Beijing summers. But on our visit people were ice skating.

That night it started snowing in earnest and continued all the next day, closing roads and the airport and blanketing the city. We walked from Tiananmen Square through the length of the Forbidden City, three hours in temperatures of 1F (-18C). But experiencing the grandeur of the Forbidden City in the snow was unforgettable.

We also had some memorable meals, including dinner in one of the city's smartest restaurants. Our hosts, who have lived and worked in the city since the Eighties, told us that in this restaurant in 1990, the only food we would have been served was winter cabbage. Just 20 years ago. Now the English-language newspaper, *China Daily*, is full of stories about the housing bubble. House prices in the three Chinese cities we visited have increased 100 per cent in the last few years. We know what happens next, don't we?

I have seen the future, and it's Chinese. You should go and see it, too.