

Travel and Adventure: One adventure explores two different worlds

by Janet Sutter

IMPERIAL PARK - An ornate stone bridge and trees, with a touch of autumn color, are reflected in a pond near Kyoto's Imperial Palace. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

GOLDEN PAVILION - Kinkaku-ji is an exact replica of a 1390s shogun's villa, covered in gold-leaf, that was burned by an arsonist in 1950. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

A-BOMB DOME - Hiroshima's former Industrial Promotion Hall, the city's only remaining World War II ruin, stands as a reminder of Aug. 6, 1945. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

KYOTO STATION - This most modern station for both the bullet and other trains was designed by Hara Koji, a Tokyo University professor. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

TIANANMEN SQUARE - A large-scale flower display, kite shops and thousands of tourists fill the square where Chinese soldiers once marched. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

THE GREAT WALL - Trees provide the colors of autumn as the Great Wall 'climbs' a mountain at Badaling, the first section opened to tourists. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

THE BIG PICTURE - Xi'an's terra-cotta warriors stand in battle formation in Pit 1. When excavation is completed, some 6,000 soldiers will stand at attention. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

TIMEOUT - Monks visiting Xi'an take a refreshment break at the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, built in A.D. 652 to house Buddhist scriptures from India. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

SHANGHAI SALES PITCH - Alongside a view of the hazy skyline and Huangpu River, big color ads appear on the huge plasma screen of a passing boat. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

SHOESHINE MISTER? - The little lanes of Hong Kong are crammed with entrepreneurs like this cobbler, whose stand is right on the street. CNS photo by Janet Sutter.

To see Japan and China for the first time on the same journey is challenging - a steep learning curve. Japan is an island nation of delectable detail; China is in blockbuster mode.

Both are enriched by ancient artworks created with incredible skill and patience. Consider Kyoto's temple gardens and Xi'an's terra-cotta warriors. A cruise along Japan's and China's coasts makes it easier to experience these two different worlds.

KYOTO

The Silver Pavilion (Ginkaku-ji) lies within a garden of serene beauty. Walking along its tree-shaded paths

offers changing vistas of pavilion, pines and pond. Shogun Yoshimasa built this retreat in 1482.

Adjacent is the pleasant Philosopher's Walk beside a canal with cherry trees overhead. Gion is another recommended walk, with lovely old wooden buildings and an occasional glimpse of a geisha. In Daitoku-ji, a complex of subtemples, Ryogen-In (1502) has four gardens to view. Another, Daisen-In, a noted Zen dry landscape garden (1509), has gravel shaped to portray a waterfall and an ocean. After a quick view of this symbolic dry sea, I had to dash by taxi to Kyoto Station for the bullet train, departing the ancient capital of Japan for the current one.

TOKYO

I arrived at the Imperial Hotel, a crossroads for Americans on tour. Soon I was on a tour bus, hearing a guide describe Tokyo as a "very crowded city" (12 million-plus people).

Among the lively decorative effects were a huge violet fish painted "swimming" up a high-rise and a big, yellow squiggle called the golden flame topping a building by French designer Philippe Starcke.

More traditional, with a tall torii gate of cypress, is the important Shinto shrine honoring Emperor Meiji (1852-1912), who ended Japan's isolation from the world. And at the Tokyo National Museum is a historic bounty of Japanese art. Contrast these with the "now" fashions in the areas of Ginza and Omotesando.

The next afternoon, I boarded Regent's Seven Seas Mariner. After a day at sea, the ship came to the next stop, one of life's reality checks.

HIROSHIMA

In the city's center there is the peace park, museum, bell, flame, monument, even Gates of Peace. Destroyed by an atomic bomb on Aug. 6, 1945, Hiroshima, once again a thriving city, is strongly focused on a world free of nuclear weapons. I saw this quote: "We must learn the lessons of history, that we may learn to identify and avoid the paths that lead to war."

The Peace Memorial Museum tells many moving stories. To cite just one, on a mannequin is a child's tattered uniform, a reminder that thousands of students were sent into the city's center that day to help create firebreaks. Many were among the thousands who died; eventually, the toll was 200,000. In peaceful contrast, when sailing away, the view was that of mountains jutting out of the sea, just as those seen in Japanese woodblock prints.

BEIJING (reached by bus from Tianjin)

The Forbidden City, once long forbidden to commoners, has acquired a less evocative name: Palace

Museum.

Once home to emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties, it is a vast complex of richly ornamented buildings with curving ceramic rooflines (also seen in Japan) and intriguing names: the Halls of Mental Cultivation, Preserving Harmony, Eternal Longevity, Gathering Excellence (one of many residences for imperial concubines).

While here, literally watch your step. The pavement of the forecourt is uneven, and a few people on our tour fell and sustained fractures. Outside is Tiananmen Square, now lively with people, flower displays, a big sign promoting Beijing's 2008 summer Olympics and only a few token soldiers.

THE GREAT WALL

Walking on the Great Wall was exciting, I just hadn't realized I'd have so much company. At Badaling - a steep hike in places - people of all ages, mainly Chinese, were in the passing parade, many posing for photos. It was quite festive.

XI'AN

The soldiers stood silently in battle formation. These magnificent sculptures had been waiting more than 2,000 years. Each terra-cotta face seemed unique, none were warlike.

Intended to be the afterlife army of the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuang, they were created, then hidden. In 206 B.C., an arson fire collapsed the roof over the army. Fast forward to 1974: Farmers digging a well found some fragments, and archaeologists arrived to rediscover and restore the army. Eventually more than 6,000 warriors will stand in Pit 1, under its hangarlike roof.

Xi'an also has a rare city wall where one may walk and observe the life of the city. Once a trading post on the Silk Road, the warriors have brought back Xi'an's prominence. Alas, the air is dense with pollution.

SHANGHAI

Skyscrapers and Shanghai are synonymous these days, with its building and business boom. A port city with a tangy, exotic past, (opium coming in, silk and tea going out), Shanghai had a downtime when the Chinese Communist Party, founded here in 1921, brought change. Now many Chinese imports and exports go through this port, which is also a Yantze River gateway. Ships cruise into the heart of the city on the Huangpu River.

The Shanghai Museum is a stunner not to be missed, with a great gift shop, too. There is also an old town and 1930s buildings from the period when the European presence was strong.

HONG KONG

A splendid mosaic of lights welcomes those approaching this island city by ship at night. The massed tall buildings are awesome, too, by day. The streets are crammed with variety: cars, people, banners, stores, signs. Small lanes accommodate small businesses, be it a cobbler or ice cream vendor.

Go up. Take the Mid-Levels Escalator to see more of old Hong Kong and Hollywood Road's antique stores. Go to the mountaintop on the tram to look down and get a sense of the city, then go on a boat tour for different views.

Too soon, it was time to leave, after dinner at The China Club, right out of the 1930s, with Chinese lanterns, a brass electric fan and pink roses on each table, polite waiters and a little orchestra.

Hong Kong has been part of China for 10 years now. Consider this quote from Napoleon: "China is a sleeping giant. Let her lie and sleep, for when she awakens she will astonish the world."

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Japan Airlines was superb; the flight attendants bowed as we landed. JAL: 800-0525-3663 or www.jal.co.jp/en/.

CRUISING: Regent Seven Seas Mariner, 700-guest capacity, a posh way to travel from Tokyo to Hong Kong. Call 800-254-5067 or visit www.rssc.com.

STAYING THERE: Kyoto's Hotel Granvia was impressive and quiet, located right at the train station.

GETTING AROUND: Kyoto, Tokyo and Hong Kong have excellent subways. In Kyoto, taking a taxi, guidebook in hand, worked best for me. Bullet train travel isn't difficult, but space is limited for carry-on luggage. The Granvia Hotel sent one of my suitcases ahead to my Tokyo hotel via the bullet baggage car.

WHAT TO READ: To really savor the trip, read short histories of Japan and China beforehand. I used Lonely Planet, Fodor's and Eyewitness Travel Guides.

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