

If you have only seven days to spend in China, my wife and I believe that you should spend the week in Beijing, the nation's capital. Beijing, while just one of many Chinese cities worth visiting, can provide visitors with a flavor of the nation and its history as the longest continuing country in the world.

In many ways, Beijing is like Washington, D.C. Both are federal capitals packed with a variety of things to do and see and leave you wanting to stay longer to see more. Unlike Washington, though, Beijing is laid out on a north-south-east-west axis in the tradition of old Chinese cities, which helps even first-time tourist orient themselves quickly. (I never got lost wandering around in Beijing; I've been lost two or three times in D.C.—and I had a map!)

I had the good fortune to teach in Beijing in 1994 and to be able to return to China five times, two of them for national tours that included stops in Beijing. Every return to Beijing has heightened my attraction to the city and my affection for the Chinese people.

The last time I was there, Beijing was lobbying earnestly to host the 2008 Olympics. The city succeeded and that means that Beijing should become an even better place to visit, a pleasant mix of the ancient, the imperial and the modern.

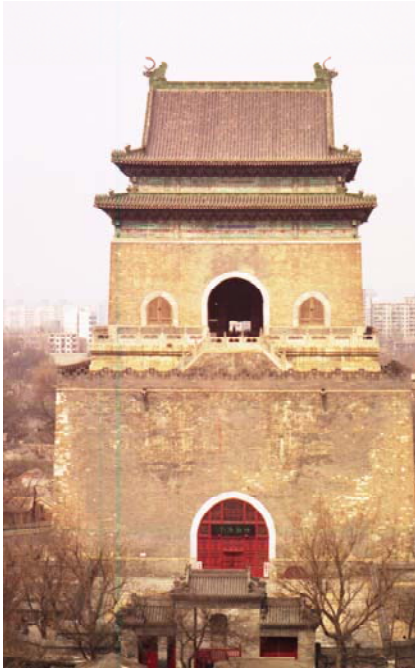
Unfortunately, one of the imperial sites is the Forbidden City which

encompasses the Imperial Palace. If you want a good sense of the complex, you're better off renting Bernardo Bertolucci's "The Last Emperor," which portrays the site as it was. You see, the imperial treasures were removed to Taiwan as the civil war was ending in 1949 and can be seen there, out of context. For most of the buildings, you get to peek, not go, inside.

But since the Forbidden City is a requisite stop, get the most out of it by renting an English-language audio guide, which supplements the various signs (also in English). Because you will exit the city at the rear (the north), go immediately to Coal Hill (in Jingshan Park) and climb to the top. It is the highest point in the city and gives you an unobstructed view in all directions. Note to the north the Bell Tower and the Drum Tower and to the south the Temple of

Heaven. To the west is Behai Park, its most prominent landmark a white domed building. If you can, visit all. All charge admission, which is sometimes higher for non-natives.

Be prepared to walk a lot and, in some cases, climb a lot. You'll need good walking shoes and the agility to climb up and down very steep steps, especially in the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower. As you'll

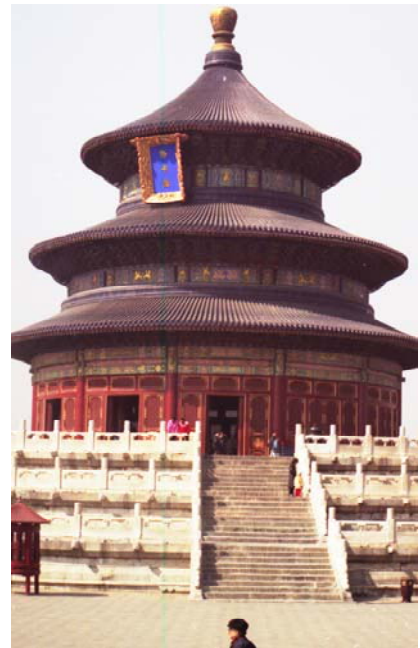


discover, consistency in the rise of steps is non-existent and can range from six inches to 18 inches and at an angle that could induce vertigo.

You can enter many sites from more than one point. For the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven (Tiantan Park), I would recommend the south gate. In the case of the Forbidden City, that's directly across from Tiananmen Square and available by taking underground walkways beneath the busy streets, which you're not allowed to cross. Tiananmen Square, by the way, is a popular gathering spot and a great place to watch people and to admire the kite-flying skills of the Chinese.

Entering the Temple of Heaven from the south enables you to retrace the path that the emperors followed on their way to The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests. If you enter from any other gate, you miss the subtle grandeur of the complex and the effect of eventually reaching the Hall of Prayer, a circular building that is approached by (again) climbing steps. Leave the park by the north gate, which will put you on Tiantan Beilu, a street that includes some old family Chinese stores that survived Communist rule.

After you're done exploring the stores, walk west to Qianmen Street and head north for as long as your feet hold out until you reach Tiananmen Square. The first time we made this walk, we stopped to dine in a Chinese restaurant in which no one spoke a word of English. We relied on a Berlitz language guide and when I showed a lack of success with chopsticks a waitress quickly produced a fork. We drank Chinese beer, which is low in alcohol, although you may opt for tea ("cha" is a good word to know in China). Until Starbucks arrived, I never had a good cup of coffee in China, but why drink coffee in the land of tea?



Two of the other in-town places worth visiting are Liulichang Street and Wangfujing Street. The former is lined with shops usually selling cultural re-creations, from peasant art to rubbings to replicas of jade chariots and terra cotta warriors originally uncovered in Xian, the capital of ancient China. One of the buildings houses a flea market where I was able to find some pre-Communist rule photographs for a good price (after negotiating). If you head east (see how the directions play into this visit), you will wind your way through a Chinese shopping district and eventually arrive at Qianmen Street.

I recommend Wangfujing Street because it is an example of how consumer oriented China has become. Once a one-way street south, with the world's largest McDonald's at the end, Wangfujing Street has been

converted into a pedestrian paradise with department stores and restaurants, some with outdoor seating. McDonald's disappeared in the makeover. A little farther north is a Holiday Inn, one of several good hotels in the city. I recommend that you stay in the downtown rather than on the outskirts. Staying at the edge of the city means you'll consume too much time going downtown rather than seeing downtown.

All museums are worth seeing, although you won't be able to do it in a week. I've never been in a museum in China that didn't impress me. My favorites are the observatory at the East Gate and the Bell Museum just off the Third Ring Road in the Haidian District (northwest quadrant). Many even allow you to take photographs. Other downtown sites worth visiting are the Lamasery and the Confucius Temple, which lie right inside the Second Ring Road (and north of the Bell and Drum Towers).

So far you've been traveling on foot or in a taxi. I would avoid riding bikes, buses and the subway. Cycling in Beijing is risky and buses and subways are crowded; thieves take advantage of the masses. Foreigners are usually targets, although a Chinese friend of mine once reported that on a bus one day someone had slit the bottom of her handbag and stolen her wallet.

The best way to see the Summer Palace and the Great Wall is via an organized tour. You can make such arrangements through your hotel and ride to both sites in a comfortable bus. You can probably combine the Great Wall and the Summer Palace in one trip. However, choose your package carefully.

The common tourist spot on the Great Wall is Badaling. In order to get to the wall, you need to navigate hundreds of vendors, which led me to quip that if the Chinese had merely stationed vendors to the north,



they wouldn't have needed the wall in the first place. Badaling is so crowded that it's almost not enjoyable. If you can instead catch a tour to Simatai, grab it. The Saturday we toured it, we were the only bus in sight and enjoyed the wall at our leisure. In fact, parts of the wall at Simatai are in

disrepair, which allows you get to see the wall's innards.

And when you do sign up for a Great Wall tour, avoid one that includes the Ming Tombs. They are vastly overrated. The best part of visiting the tombs is driving past the animal statuary that lines one of

the entrances, but on my three visits to the tombs I have yet to be taken that way.

The Summer Palace more than makes up for what's missing in the Forbidden City. The grounds include Kunming Lake and one of the oddest things I've ever seen—a marble ship, which is explained on site. You can't appreciate the Summer Palace grounds without climbing to the top.

It goes without saying, but take a good travel guide with you. I'm partial to Lonely Planet's guide because it shares my negative view of the Ming Tombs and my enthusiastic recommendation to visit Simatai rather than Badaling. The best time to visit is the fall because the weather is mild and the air clear. The winter is cold, the spring can be dusty and the summer is hot and humid. Although by next fall this might not be true, the exchange rate is very favorable.

On the way out, leave some room in your carry-on bag in case something at the Beijing airport strikes your fancy. I picked up a nice set of writing brushes with an inkwell and other modest gifts for my family. When I ran out of room, I made a mental note of what I wanted to get on my next trip.

R. Thomas Berner is a professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at the Pennsylvania State University. He now lives in Santa Fe and can be reached at [bx2@psu.edu](mailto:bx2@psu.edu).