

Yuanling to Beijing

written by Marcus | 8 April, 2016



China is by far the noisiest country we've travelled through. Market stalls all have loudspeakers that shout out repetitive messages that probably say things like "Tuuuuur-nips, get your Tuuuuur-nips" or "Shoes, shoes, shoes, I've got shoes, shoes, shoes". Calculators talk, street sweepers play tunes, there's not been a single day when we haven't seen or heard fireworks. But the most annoying noise comes from the constant beeping horns. It's not unusual for us to be beeped at as most drivers in the world seem to enjoy a good blast of the horn. But in China the truck and bus horns are unbelievably loud and have been tuned to the perfect pitch for maximum irritation. It's not a good place to get a headache, and if you don't have one now, you soon will.



BUY MY ORANGES AND PINEAPPLES BUY MY ORANGES AND PINEAPPLES
BUY MY ORANGES AND PINEAPPLES



Big trucks, big horns

11th March – 8th April 2016

The snow has all gone and there's a hint of sunshine. Shirley escorts us to the outskirts of Yuanling along with two of Mr Tang's cycling friends before sending us on our way with more food gifts. We're following the valley of the River Yuan but up ahead are some sizeable mountains so the road soon starts ramping up.



Kirsty and Shirley



Enjoying the valley with a Chinese cycle tourist

We climb on to a ridge and find a small patch of level ground for a campsite with a fantastic view. The ridge is the first of several that we have to ride up and over before we eventually arrive in the city of Zhangjiajie. Out of the middle of the city a cable car takes passengers to the the top of Tianmen mountain. This cable car ride is notable for being the longest in the world at 7.5km but also passes over the most frustrating road in the world if you're a cyclist. A squiggle of 99 bends has been carved into the mountain to take buses up to the 'Heaven's Gate', a massive hole in the mountain. To ride this road would be a grimpeur's dream with challenging gradients, incredible scenery then a high speed sweeping descent. Unfortunately it's closed to public traffic so no bikes are allowed to climb it which is a travesty to cyclists around the world.



Camping above the clouds near Zhangjiajie



Heaven's Gate. A 100m high hole in the side of Tianmen Mountain

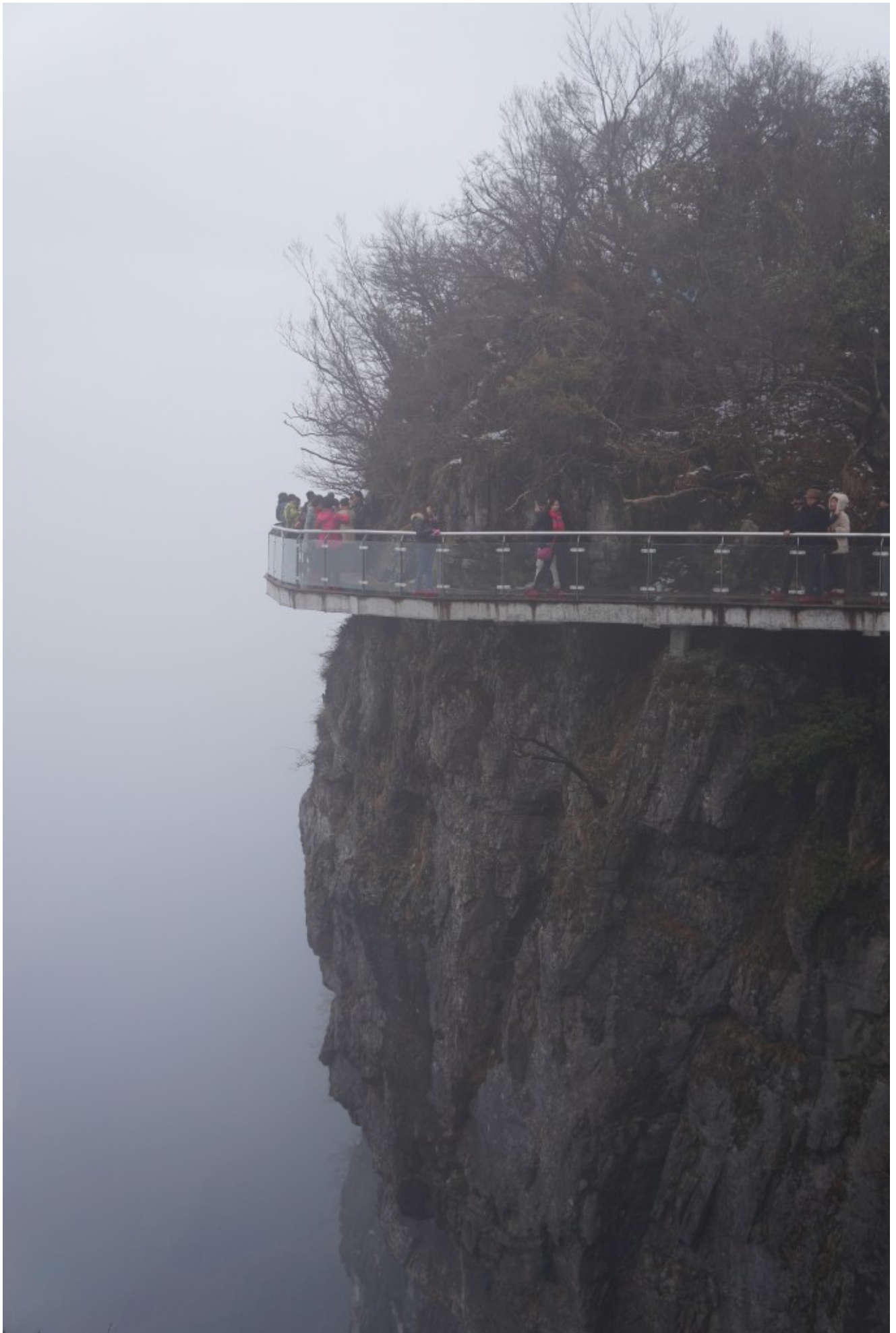


Taking the easy way up Tianshan Mountain, below us is the more challenging but off limits route.



The 99 bends

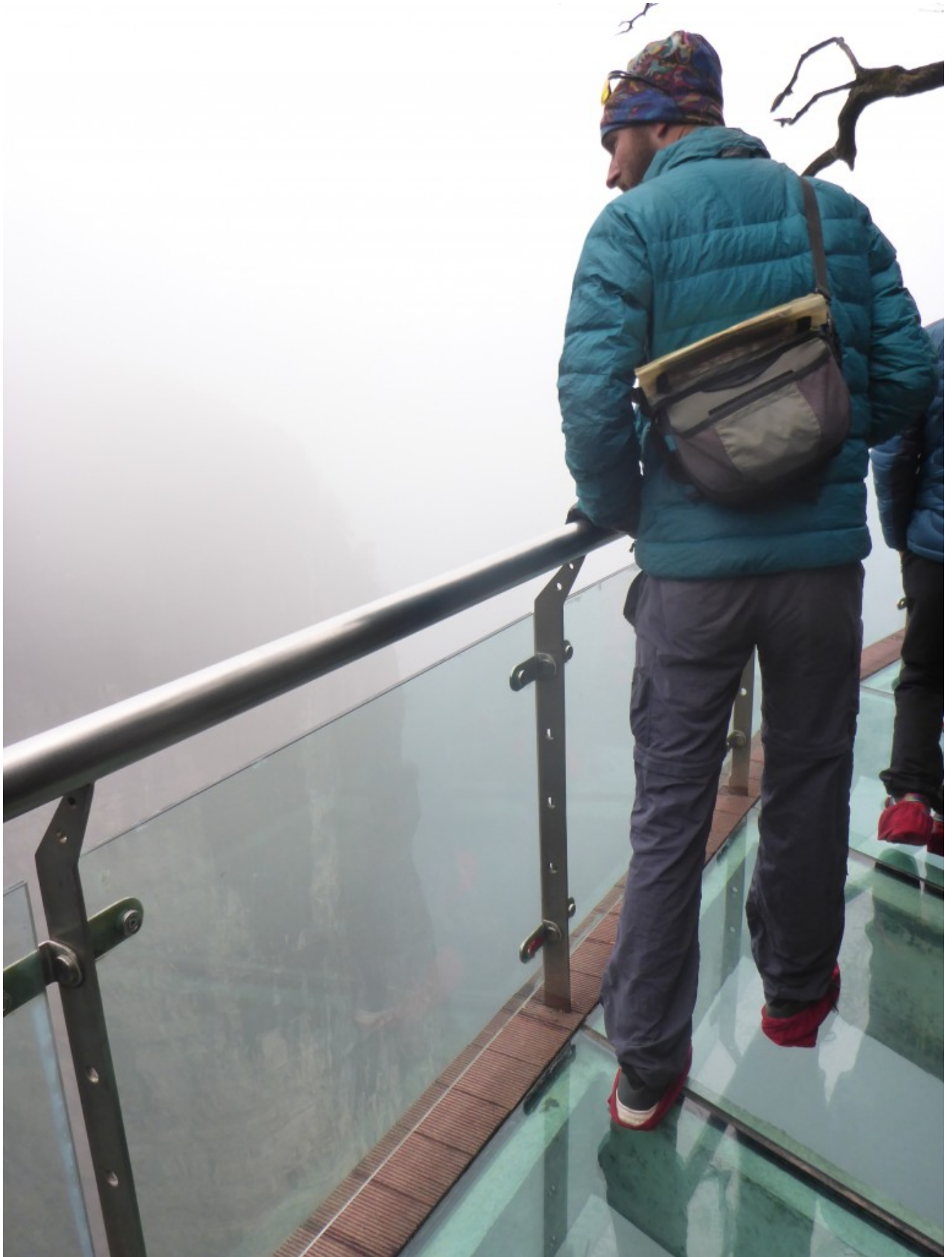
After the cable car station we shuffle out onto a snow covered walkway that has been pinned to the cliffs and runs all the way around the top of the mountain. For some sections the concrete is replaced with glass so we can see right down the 300m drop below our feet. Vertigo sufferers should probably avoid this one.



Tianmen Mountain path



Tianmen Mountain Path



Glass walkway on Tianmen Mountain. Don't look down!



Tianmen Mountain Path

Sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for as after Zhangjiajie city we find ourselves with a mountain that we are allowed to climb. The tunnel we had expected to take is closed and the detour up and over the hill is steep and long. On the other side we arrive through a high sided gorge into Wulingyuan and find the entrance to Zhangjiajie national park.



The road to Wulingyuan

Like everything else in China, Chinese tourists are noisy. At all tourist sites groups are led round by a guide shouting at

them through a loudspeaker hanging from their waist. The guide is barely audible over the dull roar coming from their guests though. Even in a place as enormous and gob smackingly beautiful as Zhangjiajie peace and tranquility is not always easy to find. However, Chinese tourists also like convenience so the park offers many easy ways to avoid having to hike up to the best viewing places. A monorail bristling with selfie sticks ambles along the bottom of a valley to save walking. The world's largest glass elevator hoists people up to the top of a 300m tower of rock to avoid climbing the 3978 steps. There are bus routes and cable cars linking up the viewing platforms and for the supremely lazy a sedan chair can be hired with two men to carry you along the paths.



Monorail!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZD0I0cq6GZM>

Monorail!



Bailong Glass Elevator



The easiest of easy options

What this means is that, with a bit of effort it is possible to get away from the crowds by actually walking. We pick a small path and spend the morning hiking up an incredible staircase with rock pillars jutting up into the sky all around us and barely see another soul. The park is marketed as being the filming site for Avatar and although this is a blatant lie you can see how there are a few similarities with the landscape that the dragons flew around in the film.

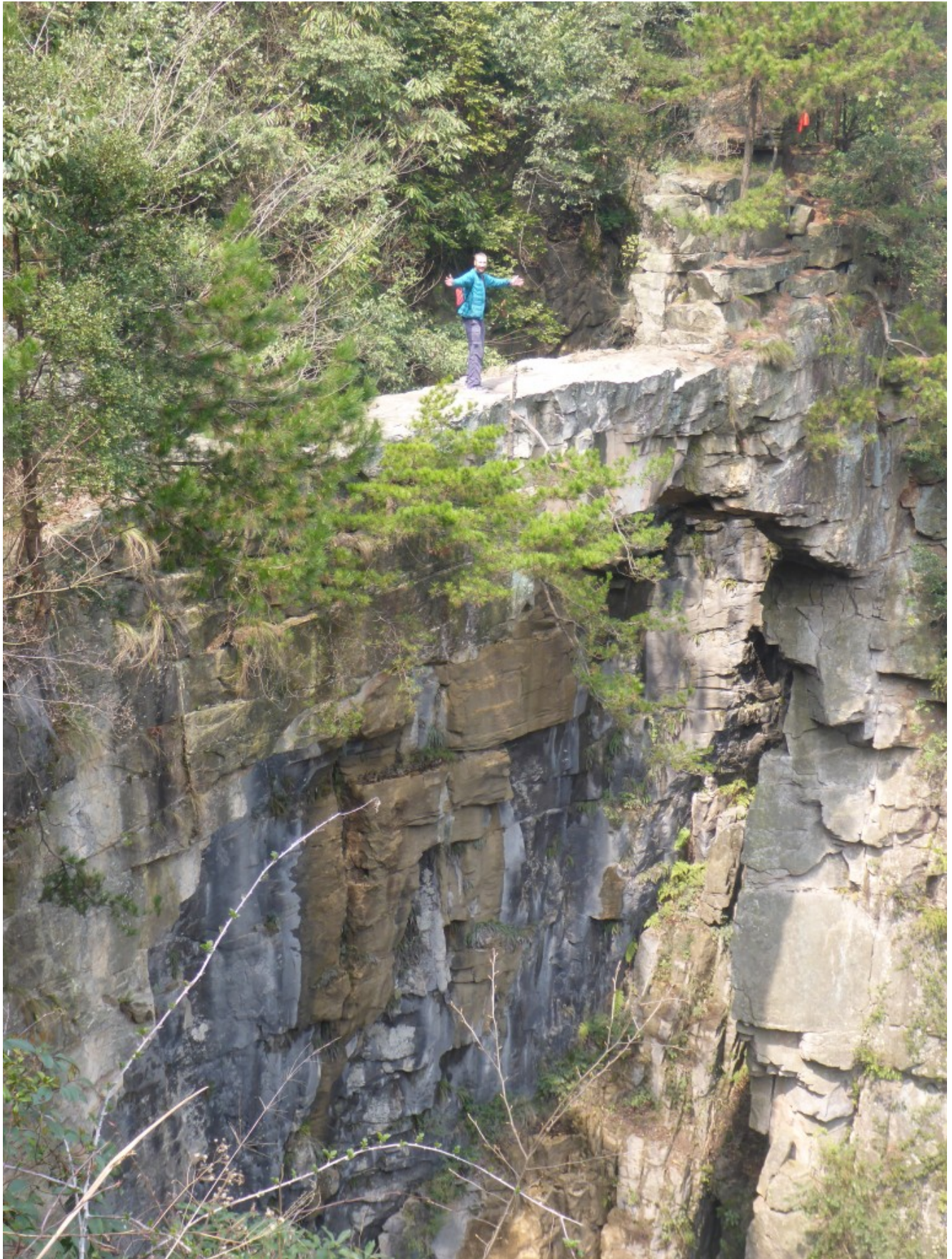












We get some warning that we're near the top as the noise builds again. The bus has dropped the crowds off at a fantastic viewing spot that we've worked hard for 2 hours to

earn. Then there it is, the final sacrilege on this area of outstanding natural beauty: The golden arches of a McDonald's sit high on the mountain top. We barely hide our disdain and tut loudly as we purchase 2 McFlurries and quickly move on.



Been there, got the selfie

After a day and a half walking round the park we hit the road again. The mountains shrink down to forest covered hills and fields, all worked by hand. It's noticeable that the average age of the rural population seems quite old. They call the young folk that move to the cities 'Phoenix men', looking for a new start away from their hard working parents. They'll earn much more in a restaurant or factory than they would in a field but it must be leaving a huge gap in the country's farming workforce.



Using cows to drag the tree trunks



Village houses

We're still drawing in the crowds whenever we stop. At a

noodle shack Kirsty has her photo taken holding someone's baby. There must be hundreds of selfies featuring us on WeChat now (Along with Google and Twitter, Facebook is blocked in China so WeChat is their equivalent). Our 'magic letter', which introduces who we are and what we're doing, has been translated into Chinese and it gets a great reaction whenever we bring it out usually in the form of two thumbs up. One woman liked the letter so much she ran away with it and we never saw her or the letter again.



Baby photos and autographs. Everyday occurrences for a 'celebrity' cycle tourist.



Studying our Magic Letter



If I accepted every cigarette that was offered I'd be on 40 a day.



It's still tricky to communicate sometimes though. In one village we try to buy some eggs and I unleash my best chicken laying mime to a small group of people outside a shop. They laugh then quietly disperse. Inside the shop Kirsty tries using our picture book which is more successful and she returns with 4 eggs. Meanwhile the group I had performed to have returned and one by one they present a handful of eggs each. We try to turn them down but of course they insist and we end up leaving with 16 eggs in a plastic bag hanging off the back of the bike.

We keep pushing north and after a ferry across the Yangtze arrive in Jingzhou where we have an important task to sort out. Our 30 day visa is coming to an end but we should be able to renew it by visiting a Public Security Bureau (PSB) which can be found in all major towns. From reports by other cyclists this sounds like a straightforward process involving a few forms, some passport photos and a handful of cash. In Jingzhou PSB we meet the duty policeman and he looks unhappy to see us. By chance there's a girl who speaks good English

who tries to help us out but the message she passes on is that they are too busy here and we should go to another town. Charming.



Ferry 'cross the Yangtze

The next big town is Nanyang which is 330km away and our visa runs out in 5 days. If everything goes smoothly we should be able to get there in time to have a day or two to sort everything out but there's not much contingency!

With a new sense of urgency we continue. As the day begins to draw to a close a van passes us slowly to take a photo before speeding off. Then further down the road we see it parked up and its occupants are waving for us to stop. "Would you like to take part in our bicycle race?" they ask after we've pulled over. It's a tempting offer but the race is in 3 days time and we need to be in Nanyang by then so we have to decline. When they find out we plan to spend the night in our tent a phone

call is made and then we're told a hotel has been booked for us a few km up the road and they've already paid for it. Not only that but they want to take us out to dinner to meet the rest of the cycling club they're all members of. It's a great evening and we leave stuffed with beef offal, chicken feet, rice wine and with plenty of new friends. This could well be a worthy sister club to The Las Vegas Institute of Sport.



Dinner with the Jingzhou Cycling Club



Weiwenjun and Gaojang, our generous new friends from Jingzhou

Charging along the road for three days we manage to get to Nanyang just in time to begin getting our visa application sorted out. The process requires us to be registered in a local hotel so we check in to the first one we find. We've just plonked our panniers down in our room when the owner knocks and tells us we have to leave again. He's just found out that he's not licenced to let foreigners stay but he takes us across the road and helps us check in to somewhere that can take us. It costs twice as much even after haggling but they do chuck in a free breakfast.



A rare riverside camping spot. Most of the time we found a small patch of trees near the road.



Powered on momos



Mantou, steamed buns stall.

Bright and early the next day we ride out to the PSB and hand over our forms but there's a problem. The hotel didn't

register us with the local police station so we have to go back and sort out more paperwork. This simple task takes most of the rest of the day as no-one at the hotel seems to know how and where to do it. After visiting the police station ourselves along with two of the hotel staff we finally get the pieces of paper we need, jump in a taxi and return to the PSB. But now there's another problem. We're told we either need a sponsor based in Nanyang who can vouch for us or prove we have \$100 for each day we plan to stay in China. We anticipated this and produce a bank statement showing a healthy balance but they won't accept it as it's a UK bank. We point to our visa card and mime an ATM transaction: card in, cash out, but they won't budge. The language barrier is making the whole situation frustrating for all parties so they call the local English teacher. He explains that what they want us to do is open a Chinese bank account and transfer \$3000 to cover the 30 days of our visa extension. We laugh thinking this is a joke but they're all deadly serious. It's also past closing time so we're kicked out and told to come back to the morning.



The massive Public Security Bureau in Nanyang

It's the last day of our visa now so after another complimentary breakfast we head back to the PSB to continue the argument. Various people get involved including the English teacher on the phone but the hours tick by and nothing happens. We keep getting told to "Just open a bank account and transfer the money". We're two foreigners spending a few weeks in their country with no fixed address, would a bank really give us a bank account? Where would we get the bank card sent? Regardless of that, it would take 3 to 5 days to transfer the money and we have only a few hours left on our visas. Drastic measures are required and we're getting nowhere here so we run out of the PSB and by 8:30 we're in Hong Kong 1200km away.



All of a sudden we're in Hong Kong

We'd always hoped to be able to visit our friends Jon and Reena in Hong Kong at some stage on this trip but hadn't expected to only be able to give them a few hours notice. By escaping to their apartment we've been stamped out of mainland China and avoided overstaying our visa but it's cost us a flight to Guangzhou and a train ride into Hong Kong. It's great to catch up with some familiar faces though and for an evening our visa woes are forgotten.



Unexpected guests of Jon and Reena in Hong Kong



High rise life

We have double entry Chinese Visas so can get back into China for another 30 day stay without any problem. However this uses

up the second entry that we planned to use for our side trip from Beijing as we'd be leaving China and coming back in again there. The Chinese embassy in Hong Kong is supposed to be one of the more lenient ones but they're not interested in our request to add another entry to our existing visa or to grant us a new one. "Nothing can be changed" is the stern response from the girl behind the bullet proof glass.

Despondently we book flights back to Nanyang and hop on the metro back to the train station but don't get far. We've come all this way to Hong Kong but have hardly seen any of it! Realising that we're rushing away for no reason we turn around and send a message to Jon to ask if we can stay another night. He and Reena are great hosts and we have fun looking round the city, proving our mantra that something good always results from something bad.







We finally get back to Nanyang late the following night after our 48 hour city break. We'd left with not much more than the clothes we stood up in so we're relieved to find our bike and

kit are safe and sound in the hotel where we'd abandoned it. We can now pick up where we left off.

We're in the heart of China's Central Plain now. A vast, flat region inhabited by 1 billion people making it one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Rice, soya beans and oil seed rape grow in huge fields between the towns and cities making use of the fertile land from the Yellow River.



Kirsty searching for a spot for the tent

The wind seems to get stronger as the day progresses and inevitably it blows from the north, right into our faces. One

of the many tiny electric trucks are great for drafting behind to make things easier and we're watched closely by the children riding in the back.



Tiny electric cars are hugely popular



...and are great for getting a tow

Our next destination is Kaifeng where we've arranged to meet up with Zhu, a Warm Showers host. After introducing us to his 100 year old mother we take a walk around the 'ancient' city. We've seen barely any genuine history in China. The few so-called historical sites we've been to have been immaculate reconstructions turned into shops and restaurants. Kaifeng is no different. The old streets are decked out in neon lights and there's not a brick out of place.



Zhu's mother. 100 years young.



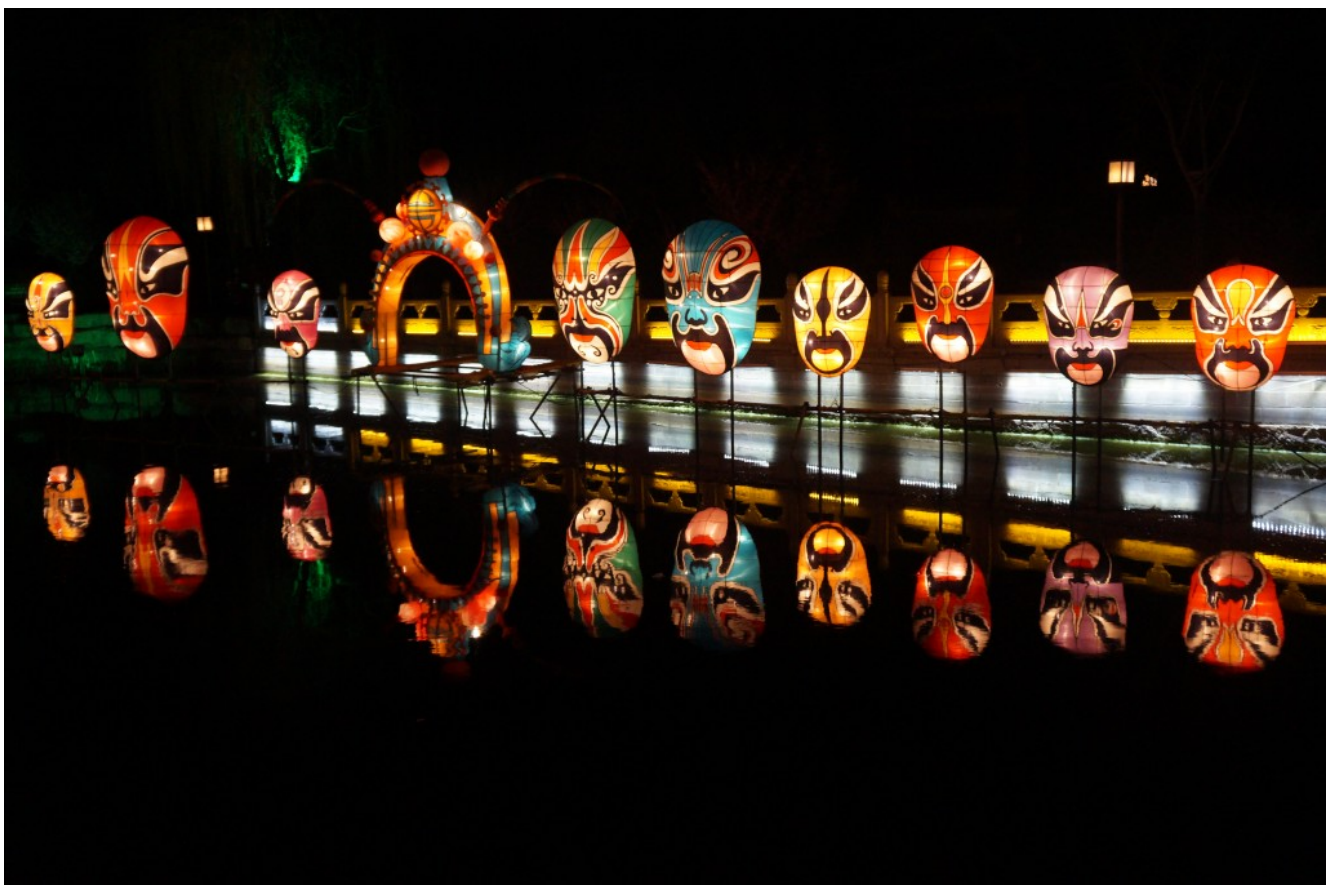
In parks and streets all over China we see people dancing. There should be more of this in the UK.



Kaifeng City East Gate



Bright lights of the Ancient City, Kaifong



Bright lights of the Ancient City, Kaifong

In search of something more authentic we've decided to embark

on a day trip to see one of China's most famous attractions: the Army of the Terracotta Warriors. Leaving the bike with Zhu we catch an overnight train to Xi'an to take a look at the world's biggest jigsaw puzzle.

1000 of the lifesize soldiers have been carefully pieced together and form an impressive sight, lined up in 3 pits under huge hangar-like buildings. It's taken 40 years to get this far but there are still another 6000 generals, archers, infantry, horses and chariots lying in pieces behind them, each one with totally unique features. It looks like the archeologists are going to be busy for a while longer.













We opt for a 'soft sleeper' ticket for the return trip to Kaifong. It's three times the price of the 'hard seat' carriage that we were in to get to Xi'an but the ability to actually get some sleep makes it well worth the extra cost. Back in Kaifong we meet up with Zhu and his friend Nana who load us up with food and cans of beer then Zhu leads us out into the wind for 20km before waving goodbye. Despite the breeze, the sun is out and warming us up nicely. We're on the G106 and this road will take us all the way to Beijing.



On the train from Xi'An to Kaifong



Nana and Zhu, our hosts in Kaifong

Although most of the time is spent on the main road, occasionally we can drop onto a parallel minor road to look at life in the villages. Here all the men wear navy blue donkey jackets and mao caps, a timeless look that's lasted decades. There are piles of rubbish by the roadside and everything needs a lick of paint. In the bigger towns there are teams of people sweeping the streets and tending to the communal parks but there's no such luxury here in the countryside.



Typical village uniform



You're never far from a card game



The first encounter with an Englishman for these children. I hope I left a good impression.



A real contrast from the big cities

After a few days the wind finally turns round and blows in our favour. With this extra assistance we're now overtaking the electric vehicles at 30kph. On a particularly gusty day we stop for lunch at a stall under a metal canopy. For dessert Kirsty pops into the next door shop to buy ice cream. Just after she's returned the wind lifts the canopy, flips it over and brings it crashing down in front of the shop where Kirsty was standing a few seconds before. If she'd spent any longer in the shop she would have been crushed. Who would have guessed that being able to make a split second decision between a cornetto and a choc-ice would be a life saving skill? Luckily no-one else was hurt but everyone was a bit shaken up by what could have happened.



Luckily only a few scooters were hurt



The vehicle of choice in all small towns

Back on the G106 we're counting down the kilometres. As

another cyclist once wrote “main roads lead to destinations, small roads lead to adventures”. We’re bypassing potential exploits in favour of getting to Beijing in good time. This could be any hard shoulder in the world as there’s not much to distract us from the task in hand. The only reminder that we’re in China being the deafening horns from the passing trucks and buses.

On our last morning before arriving in the capital we’re woken at 6am by hundreds of fireworks being let off not far from our tent. The patch of trees where we’d chosen to spend the night is near some burial mounds and it happens to be the day of the ‘Sweeping The Tombs Festival’. Traditionally people gather to tidy up graves and tombs, lay flowers and let off fireworks as a kind of spring clean for their deceased relatives. We’re just glad we weren’t blown up by a stray fire cracker.



Waking the dead with 100 fireworks

Then we enter the outskirts of Beijing. It’s a massive city that takes most of the day to get into. Where London has one

congested ring road in the form of the M25, Beijing is so large it needs 6 concentric expressways running around it.



One of the many huge roads through Beijing

At the centre of the city we roll up to Tiananmen square where we're quickly surrounded by a crowd of people who want to take photos of us. There are soldiers everywhere and they don't like the look of the mob that has formed so wade in and send everyone on their way.



Arriving in Tiananmen Square and being swiftly moved on by a soldier





Everyone wants a photo



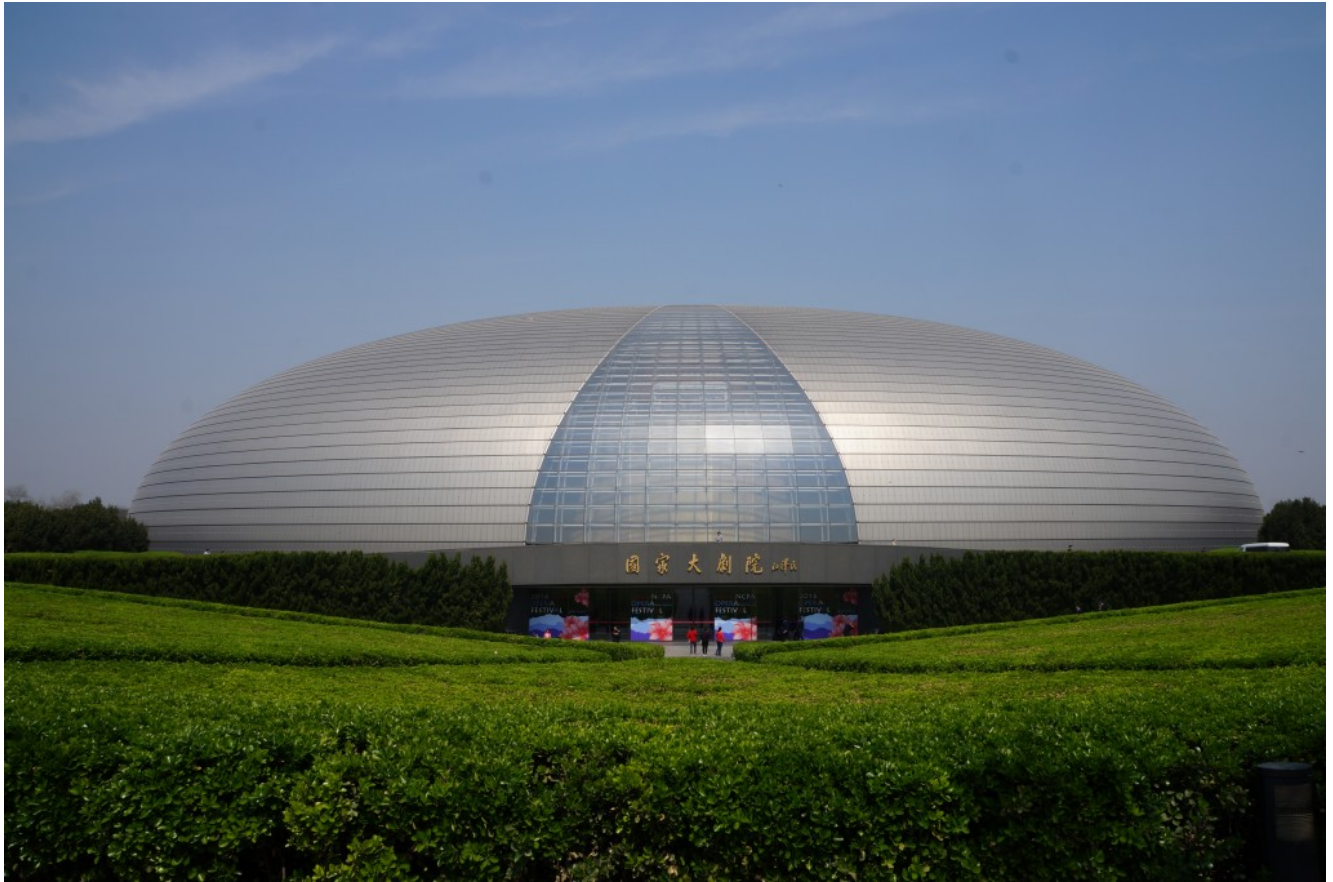
The soldiers in Tiananmen Square don't like crowds

It's a great moment as we've now made it from Bristol to Beijing by bike, covering 30,397km through 39 countries in 600 days. It's time for a short break we think!



This tandem is now a long way from home

After a free night in the Leo hostel, a favour from the sympathetic fellow cyclist behind reception, we make our way to the home of Ray and Florence, yet more amazing Warm Showers hosts. There are a few days of rest, admin tasks and sight seeing to be done before we leave for our side trip.



Beijing National Theatre



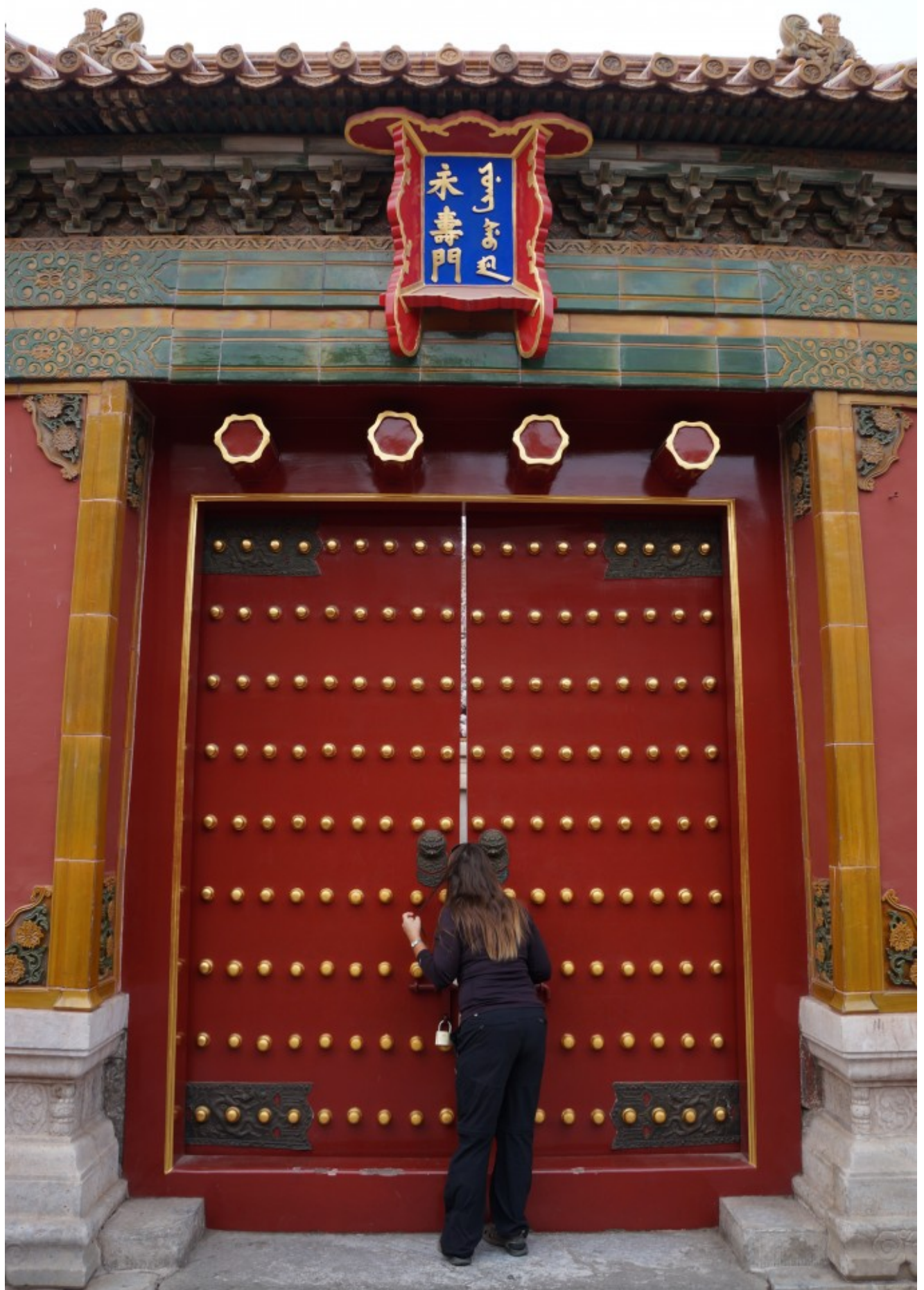
The Birds Nest Stadium



Blossom season



Entrance to the Forbidden City



Peeking



Beijing by night

We've often used races and events as excuses to visit places that we might not have gone to otherwise. As a result we've been to amazing towns like Las Vegas, Klagenfurt, Bilbao and Llanwyrtydd Wells to take part in competitions. So when I read that there was a marathon in Pyongyang and that foreigners can take part it was just the excuse we needed to book a trip to North Korea. Through Young Pioneers Tours we've booked an 8 day trip to see various places around the country and will be able to take on a half marathon while we're there. Travelling in North Korea is very carefully controlled, independent travel without a guide is not allowed and taking the bike would be impossible so we'll be spending the week on a bus.



Apart from coping with this lack of independence there is an area of even more concern as we've now used up both the entries on our Chinese visa. This means we'll be going in without a confirmed means of getting out again. Not an ideal situation when visiting one of the most controversial countries in the world. This could be a very interesting week. There are now a few more photos from our entire trip across China in the China gallery.