

THE WALL - (Third chapter of Travel write-up by Danny Gil for his school friends)

For starters, the Chinese lunch had duck tongue encased in some gelatinous cover, ducks heart splayed open in giblets, bamboo shoots, etc, but everything was good and delicious, to me at least. There were two round tables, and it happened that the two Chinese speakers were at the other table, together with the four Indians. So at our table, I ended up trying to identify the dishes as they came in one by one, lauriat style. I must have had a subconscious perverse delight in describing the dishes to the others. Steven, one of the architects, held up his plate and said it would remain clean. No food for him. Most of the others were more adventuresome and did try the dishes, and kept kidding Adam, the young guy, about eating the duck tongue; even offering a reward. He never bit, literally. Adam was quite popular, mainly because he was the kid in the group, in his mid 20s, but also because he had one of the few cell phones that did work in calling the US, and he was quite generous about lending it.



Exotic lunch. Duck tongue above the sauce bowl on the left; intestines near the fish's tail, and other goodies.

By 3:00 pm, we were done, and we hit the road for the 1 hour drive to the Great Wall. The bus driver was very skillful, and wove in and out of traffic - a necessity in any Asian metropolis. But the others were not used to it, and Adam kept yelling and hiding behind his seat, in his jesting manner, of course. At 4:00 pm, we were there: a parking plaza with restaurants, restrooms, souvenir shops, and the entrance booth.

This place is the popular tourist spot for those coming from Beijing. This stretch of the Great Wall is at a gorge between two mountains, so the wall is very steep. There were at least four towers or guardhouses on the southern flank of the wall on our side of the gorge. Violet said we all will meet at 5:20 pm. The place starts closing down at 5:30 pm, and it gets dark.

Bill, one of the more loquacious in the group, told Adam that there was free beer at the topmost tower.

At the nearby shops, there were lots of souvenirs, and I was all set to buy some saucers with the painting of the Great Wall on them. I bargained, and got a cold retort that this was fixed price. Then I realized this was a government store, not an entrepreneurial vendor. I decided to get them later, on the way back.

Most of us got to the first tower. I voiced my concern that in other places, such as the Pisa Tower and the St Peter Dome in Rome and the Statue of Liberty, warning signs are placed to discourage those with weak hearts from attempting a climb, yet here there were none. What happens if a tourist gets a heart attack way up at the mountain?



The Great Wall. There are 4 towers visible to the naked eye. Shown above are only 3 towers, with the second barely distinguishable from the first, as they are aligned.



Struggling up the steps, which are very uneven in height.

Others, mostly of the less physically fit, turned back. I knew my limitations and also turned back. I was surprised to see Mike and John, who were definitely carrying much more weight in their rotund frames, struggle up past me, huffing and puffing. But they were younger. Others swore they'd go all the way to the top. There were many tourists, too, and a couple of them on the way down indicated it had taken them about 2 hours for the climb and back.

The souvenir shops were closed by then. And so was the coffee shop with Cappuccino coffee we had eyed so eagerly a bit earlier. I had counted the steps I took going down, and it totaled just about 375 steps. However, there were stretches where the walkway was much inclined, and I counted them separately. If those steps were included in the total, then I must have gone up about 600 steps and back.

One and a half hours later, 6 of the group were still missing. We started worrying, as we strained our vision to catch for any figures coming down. Then we noticed a group coming down, from the third tower, with Adam's distinct green shirt, so we knew it was them. We estimated another quarter hour of waiting.

When they arrived, all sweaty and exuberant that they made it to the top, they recounted that it was about 2200 steps, and these were real vertical steps. Aside from Adam and Bill, Fred was one of those who made it, and he definitely was not of the young age group. Later, we found that Bill, although only in his mid forties, had had a triple by-pass last year. I also kidded Adam about the non-existent beer up there.

Dinner was at an expensive restaurant halfway down to Beijing. It was just as exotic, but even worse, must have been Szechuan style, piping hot with spices. I myself gave up. Steve, the architect who hadn't eaten that noon, fortunately had bought some cookies earlier.

With all the evening traffic, it took almost another hour to get to the hotel, where we all hit the sack.

Tomorrow, would be a flight to Changsha, 2 hours southwest.