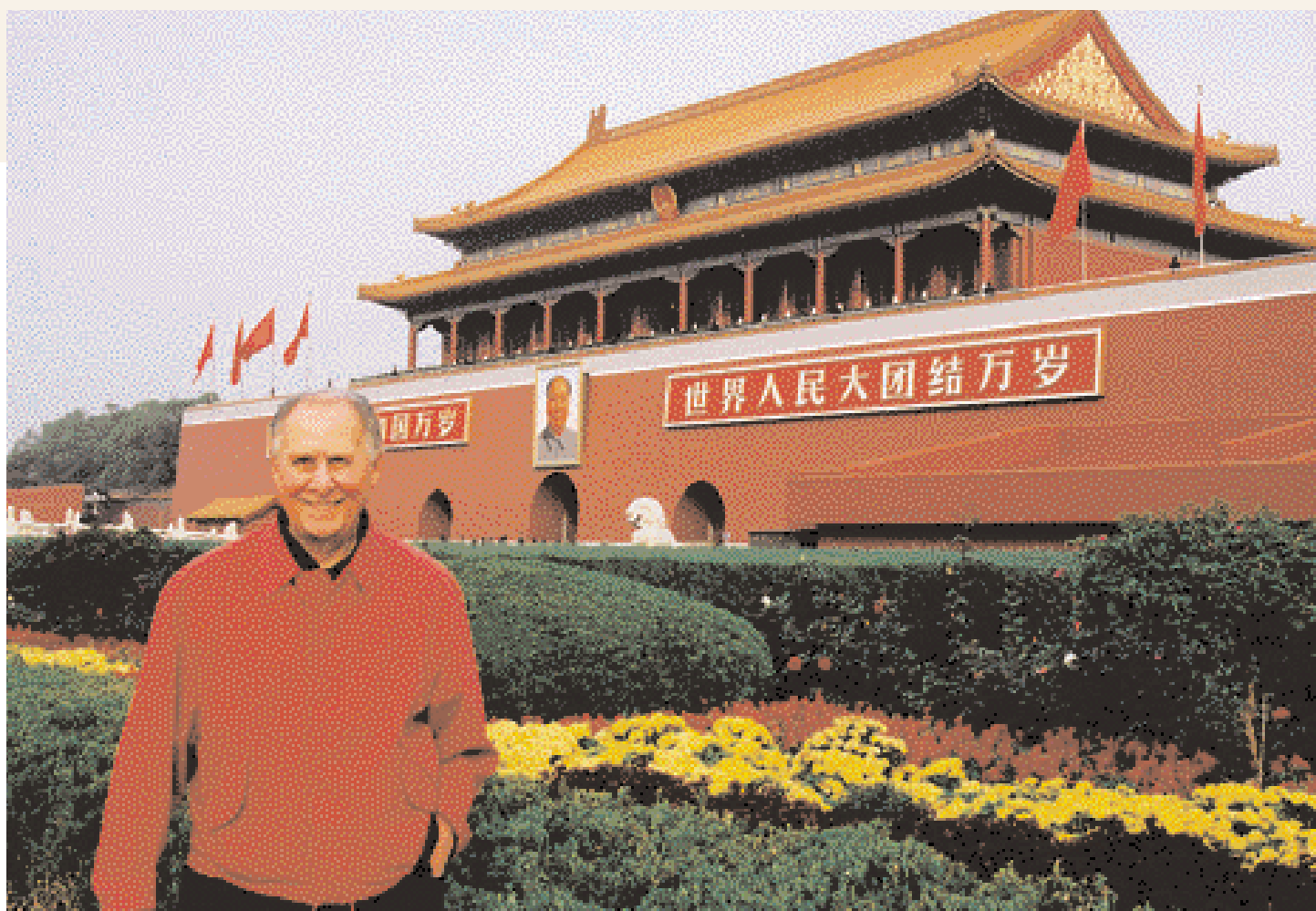


BEIJING'S

IMPOSSIBLE DREAM-COME-TRUE

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BEIJING-The Chinese are gently pumping the brakes on their 2008 Olympic projects because they were much too far ahead of the "Games", to put it mildly.



Dome at Forbidden City Gate

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At the pace they were going, construction on all of the sports stadiums would have been completed almost two years too soon. Not good, because the cost of maintaining the new facilities until showtime would have been staggering, and the August 2008 unveiling would have lost much of its dramatic punch, like a new car that sits in the showroom for a couple of years.

"Yes, we were probably too anxious," said Gao Fu of Beijing's tourism office who took me on a tour of the main Olympic sites. "And that's definitely not like us. But we've been waiting a long time. And we learned from others' mistakes." He didn't mention Athens by name, but he was obviously referring to the 2004 Games when Greek workers were frantically

hammering nails and pushing giant paint rollers on the eve of the opening ceremonies. Well, at least figuratively. Construction on Beijing's new facilities was reduced to a snail's pace during my recent visit, with completion of all projects timed for late 2007. "We'll be ready," Gao Fu said, "but we don't want to get all dressed up too soon." ▶

Thirtyish and educated in England, Gao Fu has the quick hearty laugh and mannerisms of a man who doesn't give a whit about details. Yet statistics roll off his tongue like a third language. He'd often make comments like: "Earlier I said there would be 287,264 beds available. The new total is 289,318." Fair enough.

Statistically speaking, there will be 12 new sports complexes in Beijing and 11 existing facilities upgraded and expanded. The new National Stadium, where the opening and closing ceremonies will be held, looks like and has been dubbed the "Bird's Nest." Likewise, the National Aquatic Centre nearby is known as the "Water Cube."

While Beijing will be center stage, various events will also take place in Qingdao, Shanghai and Hong Kong. That's quite a supporting cast!

After our tour of the Olympic sites, Gao Fu took us for a "refreshment break" ---American soda pop and French fries at a restaurant appropriately named "Buffalo," not exactly the type exotic interlude I had in mind. Then it was off for a bicycle-propelled rickshaw ride through some of Beijing's older sections called "Hutongs." These neighborhoods with narrow, winding streets are quickly being replaced by modern housing.

We ended the day at a six-floor restaurant called Quanjude which was about the size of a small hotel and served only one dish---Peking roast duck. "We eat every part of the duck except the quack," Gao Fu remarked. It was, in fact, delicious, down to the last drop of duck soup.

Depending on who's counting, Beijing has anywhere from 15 to 20-million people. It is massive in area, big enough to swallow at least a dozen Hong Kongs. Just around the corner from my hotel, the Raffles Beijing, was a walking street eight lanes wide---that's larger than many of our superhighways.

Beijing, like Shanghai, is galloping at a somewhat alarming speed into the 21st Century. The grey Mao uniforms of the past and red slogans are all but disappearing, replaced with designer boutiques and flashing neon. The smell of new money is intoxicating with luxury cars replacing bicycles and trendy VIP clubs hidden down dark alleyways.

Yet history, more than 5,000 years of it, remains the heart and soul of Beijing. Within walking distance from my hotel was the Forbidden City, the largest ancient palatial structure in the world where



A mother and child from China's tribal area

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Bertolucci's classic movie "The Last Emperor" was filmed, and across the street the famous and infamous Tiananmen Square, site of the tragic 1987 uprising when hundreds (some claim thousands) were killed during a confrontation between students and labor leaders and government troops.

Tiananmen Square was built in 1417 during the Ming Dynasty and the name of the square translates ironically to "Gate of Heavenly Peace." Today, the name once again seems appropriate.

Just south of the huge square is the Temple of Heaven, where emperors once came to offer sacrifices or pray for good harvests, and a short ride from these historical jewels

lies another gem, the Summer Palace, the ornate retreat of the emperor set in a vast green lakeside park.

All of these attractions offer unlimited photo opportunities, but much renovation will be taking place through most of 2007 so that they will be in full bloom for the Olympic visitors.

About 90 minutes by car from central Beijing is China's, and perhaps the world's, No. 1 tourist attraction---the Great Wall. The total length of the 2,000-year-old wall exceeds 5,000 kilometers. Ponder that figure for a moment. Its serpentine twists and peaks extend for as far as the eye can see. The spectacular scale is staggering even by today's technological standards. ▶

Visitors generally arrive at a section known as Badaling, where you can walk the wall for as little or as long as you like. There are shops and souvenir shops nearby, and the government seems to have a running battle keeping vendors from hawking their wares on the wall itself. Despite the frequent crackdowns, the hawkers always seem to regroup.

There is one other don't-miss attraction in Beijing that often doesn't make the guidebooks or government brochures, but try to set aside the better part of a day for it if you like bargains. It's called the Silk Street Market at the corner of Xiushui Dongjie and Jianguomenwai Dajie. Don't sweat the jawbreaker spellings. Everyone knows where it is. Heck, even "Beijingers" regularly shop there. I visited this intersection 17 years ago when it was known simply as "Silk Alley," literally an alley where sidewalk vendors sold raw silk and finished silk garments. Today, the alley is five floors high and silk is just for openers. Whatever you want, they have it or will get it promptly.

It would be a good idea to bring an empty suitcase with you (or buy one there) and fill it up with bargains. But use that inscrutable Chinese patience (except when they got a little too anxious with their Olympic facilities) for the best deals. On many items, you can reduce the asking price by a whopping 80 percent.

If you need a break, there are restaurants and foot massage parlors strategically placed to rejuvenate you.

From Beijing we went one hour by plane southeast to Qingdao City in Shandong Province on the Yellow Sea, just a scant few hundred kilometers across the water from South Korea. Qingdao (pronounced Ching-Dow) will be the site of the Olympic sailing events and is also way ahead of schedule for the Games.

It's another of those Chinese cities you may have never heard of although it has a population of about 8 million and looks more modern than most North American cities.

But perhaps the most famous birthplace in Shandong Province lies a few hours' drive west in Qufu (Coo-Foo), hometown of Confucius, the Chinese philosopher who lived 500 years before Christ and whose sayings are now in a bit of a revival. The old sage's stock has had its ups and downs over the centuries.

We visited the Confucius temple and the area where he was born and grew up. That night we attended a dazzling outdoor show with Confucius as the central theme. It was a highly professional performance featuring

more than 250 dancers in elaborate costumes. The show takes place every night from April to November. Like many great men in history, Confucius didn't become a "star" until after death.

On my last night in Beijing, I ducked into an alley off the main walking street. With one step, I left the neon and trendy shops and entered what the city might have looked like fifty years ago. There was a tiny stall about the size of a closet in the middle of the alley, and a scrawled English sign that read: "Internet. English Calls."

I walked in and wrote down the phone number of my wife in Montreal. He dialed ferociously on an old-fashioned phone, said a few words in Chinese to someone on the other end and then handed me the contraption. The phone rang, my wife answered and we talked for a few minutes. Total cost of that Beijing-Montreal call was about \$1.25. I didn't have the heart to bargain. ■

(Dominick A. Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

(For further information on Beijing and Shandong Province, try the websites www.cnto.org, www.tourismchina-ca.com, www.btmbj.com and follow the links)

BEIJING'S TOP 7 TOURIST ATTRACTIONS AT A GLANCE

- 1- The Great Wall, so-called 8th Wonder of the World. Enough said.
- 2- Forbidden City, sprawling palace ground of 24 emperors, off limits to the public until 1925.
- 3- Summer Palace, vast lakeside retreat where emperors came to relax and escape the heat.
- 4- Tiananmen Square, largest open plaza in the world and site of the tragic 1987 uprising.
- 5- Temple of Heaven, an architectural marvel where emperors came to offer sacrifices and pray.
- 6- The Ming Tombs, final resting place of 13 emperors from the Ming Dynasty.
- 7- Remains of the Peking Man, one of the world's most important archaeological discoveries.



Mah-Jong players

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