

Beijing



From the air, Beijing doesn't reveal many secrets beyond its physical appearance. It's huge (15 million people live in the greater metropolitan area), laced with concrete freeways, and anchored by a commercial center of hundreds of nondescript skyscrapers. But zoom in, and other elements come into focus: elegant, painted temple tips, pointing heavenward ... shady parks and gardens, where young and old come to exercise, play, meditate, dance, embrace ... neighborhoods of crowded block apartment buildings, where laundry waves from balconies, and where, on any given floor, an open doorway leads to the intimate world of home.

The Old, the New, the Now

by Rodica Woodbury

Come closer still, to the threshold of a bejeweled altar, a gold-gilded Buddha veiled by a worshipper's incense. Feel the power of epoch-old history as you stand, like a single grain of rice, in the enormous expanse of Tiananmen Square. Listen to the ageless hawking of wares—mutton meat, utensils, shoes, batteries, ginger root, flowers, live chickens—in the teeming marketplaces. Wander down the tiny street of an ancient neighborhood, or *hutong*, where traditional life reflects an earlier, simpler time. Sample the fragrant, sizzling skewers from a corner-vendor's cart ... Delight in the dexterity of the local noodle maker ... Admire the nimble fingers of the jade carver and silk embroiderer. Collectively, these secret minutiae are what create the master pattern the unique warp and weave of the larger-than-life tapestry that is Beijing.



Right: The Hall of the Prayer for Good Harvests epitomizes the beauty of the Temple of Heaven complex. It is constructed entirely of wood, without the use of a single nail.



Beijing's 17th-century Yonghe Temple is home to a school of Tibetan Buddhism, and combines elements of traditional Chinese and Tibetan design.



Preserving the Past

With 3,000 years of history as its foundation, Beijing remains China's treasure trove of ancient temples, tombs, palaces, and imperial gardens. Four of its most-visited sights—the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Temple of Heaven, and the Great Wall (easily accessible from Beijing) are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

At the center of the city is Tiananmen Square, built in the early 15th century as a much smaller space than it is now. At its northern end stands the Tiananmen Tower, or “Gate of Heavenly Peace,” once the front entrance to the Forbidden City. For more than three centuries emperors and statesmen gathered their subjects there, announcing new decrees, and liberties won and lost. In 1860, invading French and British troops used the square as a place of assembly. And, 80 years later, on October 1, 1949, China's Communist Party leader, Mao Zedong, announced the founding of the People's Republic of China to the gathered masses. Tiananmen Square was paved over and enlarged four times its size in 1958, making it one of the largest public plazas in the world. Today, thousands of residents and visitors alike arrive daily, just before dawn, to watch the raising of China's national flag.

The fabled Forbidden City—reason enough to make the journey to Beijing—was the center of China's political power. For half a millennia, during the rule of 24 emperors—14 Ming and ten Qing—it was closed off to the public, a secret world within. This “city” of red wooden buildings and pavilions, built by more than one million laborers, sprawls across nearly 180 acres, encompasses 90 imperial palaces and courtyards (which get smaller and smaller as you progress through), and includes 9,999 rooms. (The number nine, the digit of highest value to the Chinese, is the number associated with the emperors.) Its layout represents the Chinese diagram of the Cosmos, and the brilliant yellow color of the interiors is the color of royalty. In 1925, the Forbidden Palace opened its doors as a museum; the countless works of art and cultural artifacts on display offer an amazing window into the traditional way of life of the imperial court and the many thousands who lived and worked there through the centuries.

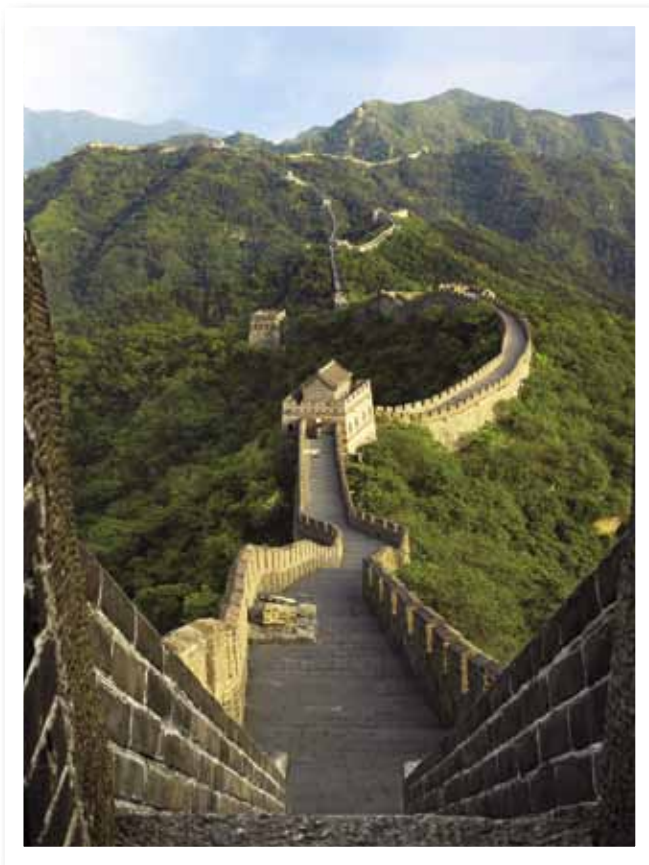
China's imperial families didn't have to travel far from their downtown palace for summer vacation. The exquisite Summer Palace sits in the northwest corner of Beijing, with serene

Kunming Lake, airy pavilions, and shady gardens as the centerpiece. The Chinese call the palace park *Yihe Yuan*, “Garden of Restful Peace,” and come here to wander the idyllic footpaths and cross the arched bridges; visit the palace, its court, and a restored theater; or row small boats out to the island temple in the center of the lake. Atop the highest hill, the Tower of Buddha is worth a hike for a close-up look at its figurine-covered exterior and the sweeping views of the palace grounds below.

For spiritual sustenance, China's emperors made pilgrimages to the Taoist complex known as the Temple of Heaven, or *Tian Tian*, which remains one of the country's most sacred sites. During the winter solstice the emperors brought offerings to heaven; in spring, after they had

Far right: Built for the 2008 Olympics, the Beijing National Stadium—known colloquially as the “Bird's Nest”—is still used for the occasional sporting event, but its main source of profit comes from visitors eager to see the building itself.





Mongolian and Manchurian invaders from the north. The Ming dynasty—from 1368 until 1644—supplied the plans, and generations of brawn. Among the best-preserved and most dramatic portions of The Great Wall are those at Badaling, just outside Beijing—nearly 60 million visitors a year come to the region just to take that monumental first step onto the greatest fortification project on Earth.

Forging the Future

Fast-forward several hundred years ... Starting in 1989, and showing no signs of slowing, the latest building boom has turned downtown Beijing into a vertical metropolis and offered international architects an unprecedented opportunity for design one-upmanship. More than 900 high-rises now define the city's busy skyline, most of them clustered in the Chaoyang business district. For the moment, the tallest of them all is China World Trade Centre Tower 3; at 74 stories high, it devours 21.5 acres of ground space. Last September, groundbreaking began for what is planned as Beijing's new, tallest tower—the China Zun, named for the shape of an ancient Chinese wine vessel—which will soar to 108 stories.

Staking their earthly claim far below these imposing monoliths, and sprinkled throughout the city, are some of the world's most innovative—and mind-boggling—structures, including The National Grand Theatre—often referred to, simply, as “The Egg.” This large, gentle ovoid, home to three performance halls, is domed by titanium and glass and surrounded by reflection pools—a photographer's dream.

Then there are the dazzling edifices built for the 2008 Olympics, designed to prove to the world that China's consciousness is turning green. Among the most intriguing of the eco-constructions are the Indoor Stadium, nicknamed *shanzi*, for its shape as a folding “fan;” the National “Bird's Nest” Stadium, which captivated viewers from around the globe with its 23 miles of entwined steel “twigs;” and, of course, the National Aquatics Center, known as the “Cube”—whose translucent blue shimmer by day and LED bubble glow at night made it the design darling of the decade.

As China continues its ever-quicken pace into the future, the list of bigger, bolder buildings is sure to grow exponentially. For unabashed admirers of architecture, both ancient and futuristic, Beijing promises to delight—and surprise—for a long time to come.

Finding the Present

If the monuments of the past and blueprints for the future are what initially lure travelers to Beijing, it's the experience of the here and now that creates the lasting

Left: Located 50 miles outside of Beijing, the Badaling section of the Great Wall is regarded as the most authentic representation open to visitors today.



The National Center for the Performing Arts was designed to resemble a bird's egg floating on water. Constructed from glass and titanium, it's surrounded by an artificial lake.



Tiananmen Square is the largest square in Beijing and the third-largest in the entire world. Built in the early 15th century during the Ming Dynasty, it is best known in recent memory as the site of the 1989 pro-democracy protests.

decreed the dates for planting, they came to the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests. This iconic temple is one of Beijing's most photographed buildings; its dazzling blue roof, capping the three-tiered building, is visible from a long distance away. Symbolically, the round temple itself represents the Chinese notion that heaven is circular, and the base, upon which the temple is built, represents the flat earth. Most remarkable is that the construction doesn't have a single nail in it.

In the less sacred realm, Beijing's *hutongs*, or little lanes, are among the city's greatest treasures. Built in the 17th and 18th centuries, during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, these neighborhoods were the result of the emperors' city planning efforts. With the Forbidden City at Beijing's center, the *hutongs* were built outward from the palace, all the way to the edge of town. Their location followed a tri-level, class-like designation: government offices, neighborhood residences for officials and nobles, and marketplaces. The maze of alleyways is inter-connected by a series of courtyards, *siheyuans*, whose fronting houses form a block, and a series of blocks forms a neighborhood. Though fast disappearing, nearly 4,500 *hutongs* remain—some as wide as twelve feet, others barely broad enough for one person to walk down—offering a close-up look at the more traditional life of everyday Beijing, and a glimpse into the city's colorful, folkloric past.

As China's most politically powerful city, Beijing continued a long-standing tradition: It built a wall to keep out

Right: Beijing's labyrinthine *hutong* neighborhoods are the last vestige of a rapidly disappearing way of life.

Discover Beijing on Imperial China, Tibet & the Yangtze River: www.oattravel.com/disYA4.



memory. The devoted citizens of this energetic, thriving metropolis have an innate understanding that the moment in all its marvelous detail is a feast to be sampled and savored.

To live among ancient palaces and futuristic skyscrapers, whether in modern apartment buildings or in the narrow lanes of the *hutongs* ... To snack on sidewalk-simmered rice noodles in a fragrant, meaty broth ... To pause in a leafy park and join a restorative session of tai chi ... To be part of a reverential audience at a dazzling production of opera, or to sit in contemplative solitude in a gold-gilded temple ... Today's Beijing is hardly different than it was 500 years ago—or will be a century from now. What seems to bind this timeline together is that Beijing has figured out how to keep its heart in the past, its eyes on the future, and its hands loosely on the reins of the present. And as travelers lucky to find our way here, we can glimpse the complex soul of Beijing—the old, the new, and the now—by embracing every magical moment.

The Peking Opera: China's Cultural Repository

Through an exacting blend of dance, acrobatics, art, music, and martial arts, Peking Opera is a living, literal expression of China's history, mythology, literature, and poetry. To the visitor, witnessing a Peking Opera for the first time is like being inside a dazzling, spinning kaleidoscope. And, though spectacular, it can be a bit disorienting ... especially because everything happening onstage has symbolic meaning.

Important to know is that the iconic painted faces reflect specific character traits and actors' roles: Red represents allegiance; blue and green stand for courage and nobility; black for wisdom and valor, yellow and white mean duplicity; and gold, imbued with mysticism, can reflect either god or monster. The instruments—both orchestral and percussion—also offer telltale hints into the action on stage. Traditional orchestral instruments, such as the two-stringed *erhu*, reed pipe, and lute are played during peaceful, bucolic moments, while drums, cymbals, and a type of castanet lend sound effects for confrontation and battle scenes.

It is believed that there are nearly 3,800 plays in the Opera's repertoire, with origins reaching back 450 years to the middle of the Qing

Dynasty. To entertain one another, rice farmers, fishermen, and villagers turned thespians in their free time, interpreting favorite folk tales, acting out good and evil spirits in cautionary tales, and dramatizing the moral values of the day. And, as the theatrical opera form evolved—

and formally organized acting troupes traveled about the land—these finely detailed cultural elements were incorporated into grander productions and served as instructional tools for the rural poor and uneducated.

In the 1790s, four regional theatrical troupes went to Beijing to present their operas to Emperor Qianlong. Their instant success elevated the re-enactment of the simple folk tales at the core of their performances to fine art.

Theaters sprang up everywhere

and attendance—both by courtier and commoner—was always beyond capacity. By 1840 the Peking Opera was officially born, and today, these historical anecdotes, tiny tragedies, poke-fun-at-your-neighbor comedies, and provincial farces are both honored and preserved—through an art form that reflects the heart and soul of China. In short, no visit to Beijing would be complete without a performance of Peking Opera.



China: An Expert's Advice

*OAT Trip Leader Sally (Yi) Qu shares
her top Beijing tips*

Top Tips

by
Sally (Yi) Qu



Where to Eat ...

I enjoy taking my friends out to try Beijing noodle whenever they're in town. It's a dish of thick noodles topped with stir-fried pork. If you'd like to try it for yourself, head to **Old Beijing Noodle Restaurant** (called *Lao Beijing Zhajiang Mian* in Chinese). This restaurant has several locations around the city, but the one found next to the Temple of Heaven is not only conveniently located, but also historically significant. The restaurant has been there for more than 100 years, and its building retains the architectural style of the Qing Dynasty. The tables, chairs, and decorations inside are all from that period as well, and the staff will serve you in the traditional Qing Dynasty's way. Since the main course is noodles, you'll generally see waiters holding a tray with a large bowl of noodles and many plates of cooked vegetables and seasonings. They sing old Beijing songs while they mix the ingredients and serve you. You'll also find other typical Beijing dishes, like *jing jiang* (sliced sweet and sour pork), *gong bao* chicken, and much more, at the restaurant. It's easy to get to by subway (it's near the Tian Tan East station), for a fare of two yuan—roughly 30 cents.

Where to Shop ...

If you enjoy browsing markets during your travels, the first place you should go in Beijing is the **Silk Market**, located near the Li Shi Lu subway station. The Chinese silk products in the market are inexpensive, but still good quality. And the market has much more than just

silk: you'll also find cashmere garments, down jackets, leather goods, shoes, hats, watches, and some hand-crafts. If you're larger than the average-sized Chinese person, this is the best place to go to find your size. One of the great things about the market is the fact that none of the prices are set—they all depend on your bargaining skills. Most of the sellers speak a little English, so you can communicate with them more easily.

What to See ...

There are a lot of scenic spots in Beijing. When you have some free time, consider heading to the **Ancient Beijing Observatory**. The observatory was first built in 1442 during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). It's now one of the oldest observatories in the world. Inside, you'll see an armilla, a quadrant, a celestial globe, an ecliptic armilla, an altazimuth, an azimuth theodolite, a sextant, and an equatorial armilla. Some of the items were invented more than a thousand years ago by the Chinese—and all of them were made hundreds of years ago. You can get there by subway (get off at the Jinguomen station), for a fare of two yuan.

How to Get Around ...

I always encourage travelers to **experience a rickshaw ride** when they're in the old part of Beijing. Rickshaws used to be the main form of local transport in old Beijing before more modern means of transportation were introduced—and now, you can only see this traditional form in Beijing. Your rickshaw driver will tell you the stories behind each alley while he's pedaling. It's extremely unique. The area is located right behind the Forbidden City. You can get there by taxi, which will cost you ten yuan—which is approximately \$1.50. A rickshaw ride will cost \$5 for 30 minutes.



Far left: For a sampling of the countless varieties of noodles in China, Sally suggests dining at the **Old Beijing Noodle Restaurant**



One of many instruments on display at the **Ancient Beijing Observatory**, the armillary sphere was used to track the movement of celestial bodies. This replica depicts a 15th-century iteration.

Left: A rickshaw ride is a charming and traditional way to experience the alleyways of old Beijing.

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