

## 2016 China Trip to Meet Jessica

Second morning at 'Outside Inn' Guesthouse, Yangshuo, Guangxi Province, China.

Last night I sat in bed for an hour writing an e-mail about our journey and first day here. I wrote it in Gmail which seemed to be working fine and then sent it and it said 'e-mail sent'. Turns out that was a load of blarney and it had gone into the ether never to be seen again. Imagine my fury!

Now it's Sunday and we have just finished our breakfast at an old wooden table out on a stone patio under a tiled roof and leafy trees with the cacophony of tree frogs and various screechy insects going on overhead. Temperature is high eighties and it's gorgeous although the humidity is also very high - am hoping I might lose a few pounds without too much exertion.

The flight was uneventful apart from being one and a half hours late but we had plenty of time for our transfer from Hong Kong to Guilin so no worries. Did not sleep much and Greg, not at all, but he did tuck a few unmemorable films under his belt - I know they were unmemorable because he couldn't remember what they were the next day.

Arrived in Guilin and looked for our name amongst those held hopefully aloft by the myriad of prospective drivers but it was not to be seen. We did wonder if the guy asleep on a nearby staircase might be our driver having tired of waiting for those damn Stragnells but then a young and much more promising-looking chap appeared clutching the appropriate sign actually spelt correctly and we were off.

Traffic, compared to our first visit in 2004, is far more organised and driving vastly improved - there is even consistent use of the correct side of the road. Our driver was extremely competent and got us here to The Outside Inn, just outside Yangshuo, in just over an hour. Despite our sleepless night we were both wide awake and thrilled to be back in this beautiful landscape and to meet up with our beloved Adam, Ava and our newest extremely sweet and beautiful grandbaby, Jessica. Despite many surreptitious prods and pokes she was not going to wake up and give her grandparents a suitable greeting so we had to content ourselves with just gazing at her. She is so dinky and utterly perfect.

Adam and Ava were in fine form and we had a great meal outside under a tiled pergola, mosquito coils smoking toxically under our feet (they still got me, the bastards!) Delicious Lemon Chicken, 'Snoozing Dragon' - an eggplant dish - Green Beans Yangshuo Style and a hot stuffed pepper dish all with sticky rice. I honed my chopstick skills in no time at all and we retired replete and very, very happy and within twenty seconds of my head hitting the pillow I was gone.



Greg wasn't quite so lucky but did eventually drift off and neither of us woke until nearly ten when there came a knock at the door. It was Adam with baby in sling on his chest. He had walked the forty minutes from their apartment along the canal to say hi. His back was drenched in sweat but, with sun behind him, Baby Jessica was protected and happily wide awake. We got our cuddles and coos in and when Ava arrived on the family scooter we all had breakfast again outside to the serenade of the now almost unnoticed cacophony of tree frogs, insects and birds whilst the occasional iridescent swallowtail butterfly flitted by.

Tummies satisfied we chose two old bikes from a shed - best of the bunch available and looking like they possibly had working brakes - and off we cycled to Adam's bar in town, The Lounge. The cycle route down the canal path is utterly beautiful. The canal is only about eight feet wide with an attractive six foot wide concrete path running alongside. Close to both edges, covering almost every square inch of space available, are planted vegetables and vines of every variety, many of which we don't recognise.

Spreading out beyond are small fields and big square pools, the sides about thirty feet or so, filled with bright green rice plants at different stages in their growth, lotus plants raising their giant umbrella leaves high above the water - some of them throwing up a bright pink and white blossom - all so beautiful. Over some of the pools stretch bamboo frameworks on which grow squash vines that have been planted into the banks and whose foliage and blossoms now shade the pools from the hottest sun. We frequently see older people, their loose trousers rolled up, wading about bent double looking for crayfish and sometimes fish they have 'grown' in the pools along with the plants. It's ingenious and every turn is like a geography lesson. And as if this weren't enough, in the near distance rise the fabulous bamboo and tree covered limestone karst mountains rising almost perpendicularly out of the landscape, their strangely shaped peaks sometimes jagged, sometimes curved or rounded into strange and beautiful shapes.

On reaching The Lounge, we met Tally again - Adam's dog - who wasn't overly impressed with our arrival, but then came Dave, an old friend from last year's wedding extravaganzas so we had some good catch-up chat and coffee.

Ava meanwhile, poor lass, was on the phone trying to get some sense out of her family re their plans for their arrival and where they were all going to stay. 'Like herding cats' as Greg would say! Adam keeps out of such arrangements now - he has learned this is the best strategy and sticks to it as he knows that whatever is decided upon will be altered two or three more times before the event.

[It's now two days later! Sorry but events overtook me and this is the first opportunity I've had to get back to you! Now I have to try and remember all that's happened and I only hope I can].

Returning down the canal path on our bikes we had a bite of lunch at the inn - this always consists of three or four dishes into which everyone digs, spooning or chop-sticking small portions into little individual bowls on top of sticky rice or noodles. It is all utterly delicious and freshly cooked with freshly picked vegetables. They haven't heard of dessert here which is a great thing....







We spent a pleasant afternoon chatting with other guests and swatting the odd mozzie. They come from all over (the guests that is), Chinese, European, American plus a smattering of Australians. The inn is owned and run by a very personable Dutchman by name of Ronald, who spends a good deal of his time travelling having found a very reliable staff of mainly young women who run the place with great efficiency when he is gone.

A young Swiss woman and her Chinese husband are here with their two little boys of about four and two and the boys are having a fabulous time. Things are very laid back and they have the run of the place and the freedom to climb the trees, fish in the small pond, play with the kittens and generally run free. The guesthouse 'girls' keep an eye and play with them too so their parents get a good rest and practise what might be described as 'benign neglect', the boys meanwhile have a blast. They stay up until the adults go to bed, as in many Mediterranean countries, and seem to have much more staying power than most of us do. It is a different kind of parenting and has its pluses and minuses as far as I am concerned, but they are very happy children and their parents are delightful.

It was very hot but mostly it was the humidity that made us yearn for a swim, so once again we climbed astride our trusty rust-buckets and cycled six or seven miles to Moondance, another guesthouse with a beautiful pool into which we fell with grateful relief.

Ava, her parents plus her sister, Noah, Noah's husband and three year old son, Bo-bo and an aunt, all arrived a little later having been appraised of our whereabouts. It was lovely to see them all again and there were lots of hugs and kisses and conversations not one whit of which were understood by either party but what the heck - we all got the gist. We ate before returning to The Outside Inn where they were booked to stay in adjoining rooms.

Ava's mum and I 'shared' the babe for the rest of the evening - she, jouncing and bouncing her about quite energetically in a sling carried across her chest and chattering to her - me, a little more gently cooing and singing and showing her the flowers etc. Jessica was perfectly accepting of and happy with both methods of childcare and smiled and gurgled for us both in equal measure, - such a little diplomat!

We gave them the gifts we'd brought, not a very exciting or original selection - chocolates for all and a carton of Western cigarettes for Dad (suggested by Adam and happily received). The highlight for everyone though were the Thomas the Tank Engine pyjamas, dressing gown, backpack and toy for Bobo who is apparently a TtTE fanatic like many British youngsters of his age. Bobo was so excited he nearly burst and wanted to go off to school with his backpack packed with Gordon the Engine right away! It took a little persuading that perhaps he would have to wait a bit for that event but the promise of Jessica's party and balloons and cake on the morrow did the trick and he spent the rest of the evening choo-choosing Gordon around the floor oblivious to all else.

I had expected to sleep like a log again but at three a.m. was still wide awake. Greg did a little better and I did get a few hours before the dawn. We have air-con in our room but we don't want to run it at night if we can help it. Trouble was we had quite a warm duvet and we'd push it off and then feel the need of a little cover and haul it up and so on all night. The next day we explained the problem to the sweet girls who came to clean our room

demonstrating with actions our night's discomfort and the reason for it as best we could. The result was the removal of our duvet and the supply of a rather narrow sheet which we spent last night yanking from one side to the other to cover the various bits that were getting a little chilly.

The morning was filled with balloon blowing, with the aid of a helium tank thank goodness or I might have succumbed to respiratory failure there were so many, and decoration by way of photographs on ribbon strung between any available upright be it tree or architectural structure, balloons by the hundred in a tasteful colour scheme of blue, turquoise and silver and the hum-dinging topper of gold blow-up letters strung across the entry spelling out JESSICA 100 DAYS in case anyone was in any doubt about what this great occasion was celebrating.

Noah, her husband and I were mostly on balloon duty whilst Adam ran about like a blue-arsed fly organising and doing as much of everything as he was able, and Ava instructed, fed the baby and organised from the position of 'she who was in ultimate charge of things'.

Mum looked after the baby when she wasn't being fed and Dad wandered into the midst of the mayhem every so often and smiled benignly and looked pleasantly congratulatory before retiring to an outer-limits table for another quiet fag, allowing the madness to continue with his blessing. It was all great fun and reminded us of the weddings last year (particularly the balloon blowing).







We retired to our room for much needed showers when all was in readiness and there occurred the event which was the cause of the most narrowly and miraculously averted social *faux pas* of my life, of which I am going to tell you NOTHING. You may, individually, manage to wheedle this story out of me if you can get me very, very drunk, otherwise my lips are sealed. And so are Greg's if he knows what's good for him!

By the time we made our way back to the main event, tables had been set up at the entrance with cake on sticks and party hats (Greg had laboured to put these together for some hours - a nice sit-down job he felt he could cope with quite well), more tables piled with various drinks, glasses and ice, and the music was playing - all very festive. The first guests had arrived and red hung-bao envelopes were in evidence.

The star of the show, Jessica, appeared in all her finery; a cute little silky white number complemented by an even cuter headband with large white lotus flower to adorn her almost, but not quite, little bald head. She was in fine form to welcome all comers and seemed to enjoy the party and the many guests who cooed over her until much later, tiring of the whole thing, she let us know it and retired to her room for sustenance and comfort with her mum, dad and maternal grandma in attendance. Her recovery was quick but sense prevailed and she did not return to bestow her blessed presence on her admirers further.

During the course of the afternoon drinks flowed like, well, err, drinks, and great vats of delicious food miraculously appeared from the relatively small kitchen of the guesthouse one after the other, the ultimate course being a beautiful two-tiered cake with a chubby baby on top. The party started at about three and the last guests left at about ten thirty.















The two little boys and a gaggle of other little kids were, needless to say, still going strong.

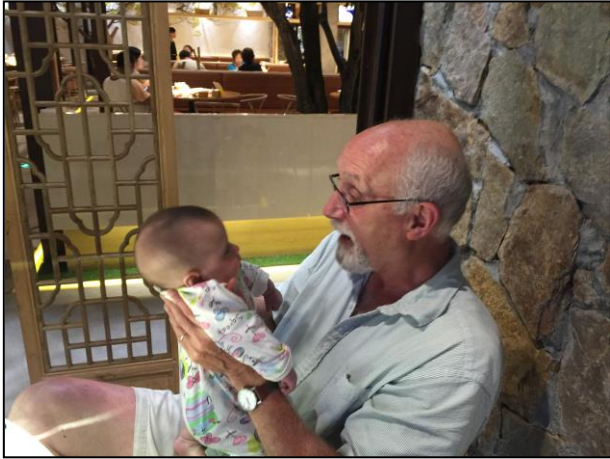
Today, Sunday, (I have to remind myself!) we were up at about nine and fully expecting to be on the work gang for demolition of yesterday's decorations and looking forward to a fun-filled hour or two of bursting balloons, however, Adam had beaten us to it having been up since six and taken Jessica for a long walk around the village to allow her mum to get an extra hour or two of shut-eye. He had not burst the balloons - I think we and all the other guests might have noticed - and they lay in a rather sad looking heap, devoid of their uplifting helium, in the middle of the patio. Adam told us he thought the little lads would enjoy popping them when they woke and failed to notice our brave disappointment. As it turned out various little village children arrived to rifle a few balloons and went off delighted with their treasures and the two little boys descended on the remainder with surprising gentleness and played happily with and amongst them not popping a single one!! What's the matter with kids today?

I volunteered to ride over to The Lounge with Adam and walk Tally back along the canal path to our inn from where he would later collect her thus allowing him some time to tidy and clean up the bar ready for the next opening.

The stories of Tally's recent escape and banshee-like slaughter of a number of ducks and chickens belonging to understandably irate villagers who then managed to extort a perhaps reasonable amount of money from Adam for replacement of the dead fowl plus a perhaps unreasonable amount extra for the inconvenience had me just a mite perturbed. Adam's many tips and warnings about her possible response to other dogs and her alleged ability to drag your shoulders out of their sockets, etc. did little to boost my confidence and so it was with some trepidation but an outward show of supreme confidence for the benefit of both Adam and the dog, that I took hold of the long lead and wrapped it twice around my hand.

I had, with great presence of mind, cast off my flip-flops in favour of my solid rubber-soled trainers thinking they would provide more grip should I find myself towed, heels gouging tracks, behind a mad, red-eyed, slathering hound whose blood was up. As it turned out we had a most pleasant saunter, stopping every so often to smell the flowers and pick up the odd pee-mail or two. Tally did deign to give the odd cursory, "am I bovered?" snarl at the occasional village mutt who thought to mention something about territory and we arrived at the end of the path in a happy state of grace. Adam had come to meet us on his scooter and Tally hopped aboard her favourite form of transport, nose and tail out either side to catch the breeze. I hopped on the back, nose and tail tucked in, and we were soon back at the inn, triumphant!

Ava's lovely mum and I swapped the baby to and fro for the remainder of the morning allowing Ava to feed her now and again so long as she was quick about it, and then it was time to ride to town whilst they took a taxi, to enjoy a fabulous goodbye lunch at the Rock and Grill. This was surprisingly one of the best bits. Ava's dad has always seemed to feel a bit of a spare part in all the celebrations of the past year. All of us have had parts to play but without the ability to converse with us or understand what the heck we were all jabbering and laughing about and not being much of a chap for minding the baby (like another





Grampa we knew, he prefers them older and able to talk sense!) My only solution was to smile and nod at him frequently. He maybe thought I was a little demented but it was all I could do.

Anyway, at said lunch and with the help of Ava and Adam as translators, plus a few hefty rice wines, he began to open up a bit and we were able to ask him a little about his past and his life during the Cultural Revolution and all that turmoil. Ava said he had never spoken about it before and unfortunately we only had a little time but it was fascinating to hear just a few of the travails of a man who had experienced what we have read and learned about. Suffice to say here he had begun a four year architecture degree just one year before it all kicked off. Being of an educated and reasonably well-off family meant he could find himself in a lot of trouble and so he joined the Red Guard purely out of self-preservation and was deployed to Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Province. He muddled along behaving himself and learning Russian as instructed and when that relationship fell apart he continued to learn Russian under the bedclothes because he enjoyed it. At some point he managed to depart - not sure if he went AWOL or what - know there was much more to tell and I hope that Ava will, at some time, question him a little more and write down both her mother's and father's histories for little Jessica.

Friday 9th

Okay Folks, I'm going to get this off to you all now despite there being many more adventures to tell you about including Greg's tumble into a rice paddy (only his dignity was damaged), playing Texas Hold 'em at The Lounge, Quiz night at Demo Bar, scootering up into the mountains, swimming in the Yulong river, Chinese cooking class and more.

Hope you are all well and that the weather's not been too unkind.

Much love to you all,

Penny

xx

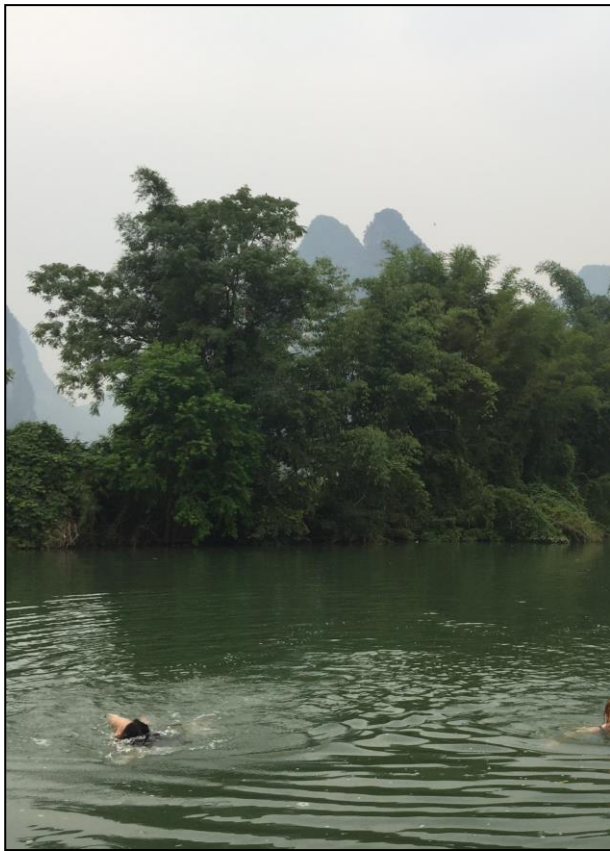


## China 2016 Part Two:

The weather continued in the low nineties and the humidity just about as high as humidity can get and so we often sought out opportunities that allowed for some cooling off. One of them was the Yulong River which ran, thankfully, only a five minute bike ride from the Outside Inn. The path alongside the river was paved with pavers that lacked their infill of sand so clattered against one another as we rode. The track to reach this path was of the off-road variety and led through more beautiful agricultural country – ponds, rice paddies, cotton, and all sorts of squash and veggies. We arrived at the river where we'd arranged to meet a couple of friends, Mila and Trish, for a swim. We mistook the correct venue and stopped at the weir a few hundred metres upstream and watched people and dogs cooling off before a phone message put us right and we arrived at the 'steps'. Here we were alone but for a water buffalo cooling off just around the bend after a hard day's work!









We plunged in and though I might have wished the water a few degrees cooler it was still very refreshing and Mila and I swam up to the weir and back a couple of times. You may wonder at our swimming in a Chinese river of some size, fearing the various 'additives' it might contain, however, Adam assured us that the source of the Yulong was not many miles away and it does not flow through any major conurbations and so if you don't actually drink it you will probably survive the experience. He and friends have been swimming in it for years and it looked awfully inviting!

We had no towels and Greg had worn his shorts into the water so we rode back soaking wet. I was ahead and enjoying the cooling breeze on my wet body when suddenly a violent explosion of expletives, of a nature I couldn't possibly render in print, emanated from back around the bend. I headed back as fast as I could and there was Greg, hauling both bike and self out of a watery and very muddy ditch at the edge of a rice paddy. It was clear he was not hurt and so I did enjoy a good laugh at his expense before commiserating as a good pal should. He had become unbalanced by a piece of rocky terrain, felt himself falling but because his shorts were soaking and had stuck to his saddle he couldn't escape an arse over tit. His backside was smothered in mud and on arrival at the inn he caused great hilarity amongst the lovely Chinese girls who run the place. One sweetly led him out back to the squat toilets which are equipped with a hose and there he cleaned himself up enough to return to our room for a proper shower.



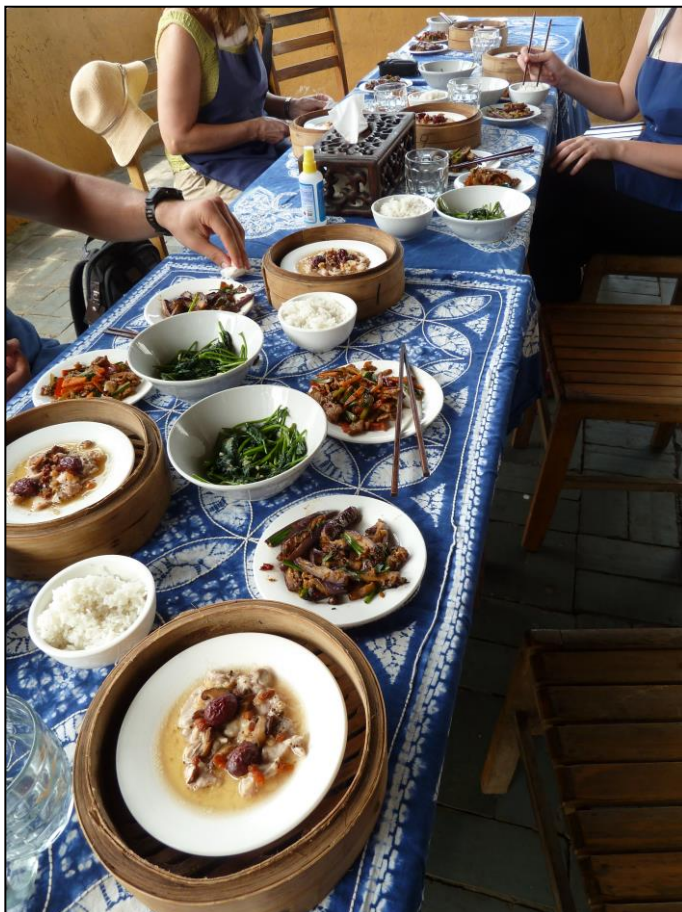
Whether it was that evening or another I don't recall, but we were at The Lounge for Texas Hold 'em Night. This has become a regular Wednesday night feature for Adam and a number of friends. The stake is very small and the victor could look forward to pocketing the grand sum of £10.00 or thereabouts by the end of the evening, so it wasn't as though our worldly goods were at stake. This was extremely fortunate since neither Greg nor I had ever played before and are not particularly good at learning new tricks. Jono however, gave us brief but clear instructions and we played a 'pretend' round before the real thing. Our contribution to



the actual play was short-lived as was our contribution to the pot although I did win one hand with a pair of queens. Good fun.

It was late by the time the game was over and our bikes had no lights so Adam fixed a couple of very small torches on the handlebars with electrical tape and we set off down the canal path. Unfortunately mine did a great job of illuminating the trees and branches overhead and Greg's was not much better but we rode slowly and did make it back without a dip in the canal – only problem was our leisurely pace allowed the many mosquitoes a marvellous opportunity to land and bite the hell out of us. My O positive blood is of particular delight to mozzies apparently. Normally Greg uses me as a human shield but they got him too on that ride down the canal ha-ha.

Next day was cooking school day for me. This was Ava's suggestion and she arranged for me to spend the morning at the cooking school of a friend just round the corner from the Outside Inn. Of course I received a good discount as we always do when Adam or Ava are involved. One of the girls from the Inn walked me round just in case I got lost – they are so very sweet. My fellow pupils and I gathered at a long table on an open patio under a tiled roof where we were provided with bottled water, aprons and told what we would be doing.







There were a middle-aged couple from Norway, a young Israeli woman and her Russian partner, two young American friends travelling together (one from Portland, Oregon and one from New York) and me. All were really friendly and excited about being in China.

The cooking school consisted of a number of rectangular adobe brick buildings with multiple doors and windows to the outside. Tables were arranged in a big rectangle, the teacher's table at the top end. Every table had its own little gas fired hotplate and various condiments, knives, carving boards, etc. Underneath was a shelf on which were the pans and a number of dishes of prepared vegetables.

I don't remember the teacher's name but she was a Chinese Delia Smith – very precise and clear in all her instructions and explanations and you didn't feel you could muck about too much. First we put together a steamed chicken with mushrooms dish which was placed on small plates each of us putting our own in a steamer which was then piled on top of the next steamer until there was a tower of eight steamers. These the teacher stood in a wok and put aside to be cooked closer to lunch time.

Next we made 'egg wrapped dumplings' - small pork stuffed omelettes with mint and garlic. This meant turning on the woks and throwing all the doors wide! We got to eat these right away and I think everyone was pretty pleased with their results, well, no-one burned them or had a disaster. Next came 'stir fried pork with vegetables and oyster sauce', then 'eggplant Yangshuo style' and finally 'green vegetables with garlic.' We all made tiny portions with the ingredients provided but enough to make a terrific lunch which we ate outside, panoramic views over fields and mountains all around us and a big fan cooling us down after our labours. It was a really enjoyable morning and we all got a print-out to take home. I don't remember 'domestic science' being half so much fun at school nor the results half as tasty!

I think it was that evening we went to 'Quiz Night' at Demo Bar. Demo Bar is situated in a rather attractive and very long 'mall', for want of a better way to describe it. It is all undercover and stretches many hundred metres with shops and eating places all along one side each with a view and sometimes a veranda over the Li Jiang River. It is paved with attractive stone square pavers of about sixteen inches square but down the middle runs a smooth concrete pathway of about six feet wide, a pleasure to cycle down. The great river boats arrive daily at about 2p.m. from Guilin and divulge their passengers at the furthest end. By this time myriad stall holders have set up their stalls of tourist trinkets, etc. down the opposite side to the more permanent shops and bars and within minutes all becomes a hub-bub of noise and movement.

Mila, the baker friend, has a wonderful coffee shop here where she sells her freshly baked cheesecakes and tortes with the best coffee you could ever hope to find. She is the jolliest and warmest of people and I could happily spend a lot longer than we were able in her presence. She was the one who helped me ice the wedding cake last year. Her bakery 'Bite Me' is right next door to Demo Bar – owned by friends of Adam's and beautifully air-conditioned as is Bite Me.





We arrived for the quiz after a cycle up the canal, across some of the mad streets of Yangshuo and through the beautiful park lit with Chinese lanterns. Adam had by this time procured a better light for Greg's bike and a head-lamp for me. The head-lamp, proving not the most attractive or comfortable of headgear and leaving me with hair shaped like a weird upturned cauldron every time I took it off, was soon swapped for the one on Greg's bike. Fortunately his bald head did not suffer quite the same consequences of the headlamp.

The quiz is generally collated and hosted by newcomers to the staff of the various English schools in Yangshuo. This time it was a young American lass and her friend. It was a fun evening and our team which included Adam, Ronald, our host at the Outside Inn, Greg and me, did better than the last time we attended a year ago at which time we made an ignominious retreat at the end of the evening, - on this occasion we came second. There are some very bright sparks amongst Adam's friends – they amuse themselves with cryptic crosswords and intellectual games, a bit out of our league really!

On the Friday Adam decided he should take us for a bit of an explore of more outlying country, specifically the mountains. We hired a scooter for Greg and I opted to ride on the back of Adam's. He said the weather forecast indicated it might rain a bit later but in the heat and sweltering sunshine of the moment that possibility seemed rather far-fetched and we climbed aboard with nary another thought.

Scooters and Mountains:

Adam thought he knew the route, well, he had an idea of which direction we needed to head up the valley and said we'd eventually join up with the main road whichever small track we took. Having arrived at a number of dead ends we did finally, after many twists and turns through little villages where we got to see the daily morning routines of the inhabitants - mostly involving agriculture or cards, arrive at a somewhat more major road – rather like a smallish B road in the UK. We wound our way upwards marvelling at the views and the cultivation which reached as far up the mountain slopes as possible and further in some cases to an almost vertical degree! This was getting into tea growing country and though the skies had become a little overcast, very beautiful.

The first thing Adam wanted to show us was an ancient bridge over the Yulong River which was way upstream from our swimming spot. It was a popular tourist spot with bamboo rafts doing a roaring trade. We had experienced the bamboo rafts on the Li Jiang River on a previous trip so climbed over the bridge and took a few pictures and rode on to a second smaller but equally ancient bridge further upstream. This one was much more beautiful for being peaceful and surrounded by glorious countryside. We sat with our feet in the crystal clear water nearby





Adam suggested we stop and take a look at what was signposted as 'Ancient Stone Houses.' Ronald had mentioned it and said it was worth a look but not to go the way of the signpost as it led to a more touristy spot than if we took a different track. He had drawn us a little map and so we duly parked in the closest village and took off on foot up the mountain path which had clearly once been paved with great slabs of what looked like granite. It was reasonably easy walking and though hot, a joy. The mountains rise within short distances of each other and we caught views between them of the green, green valleys.

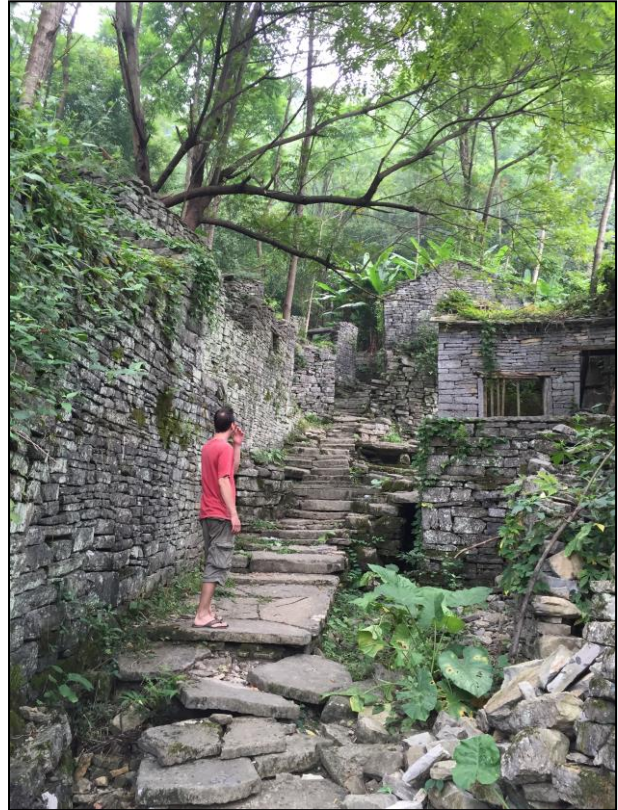
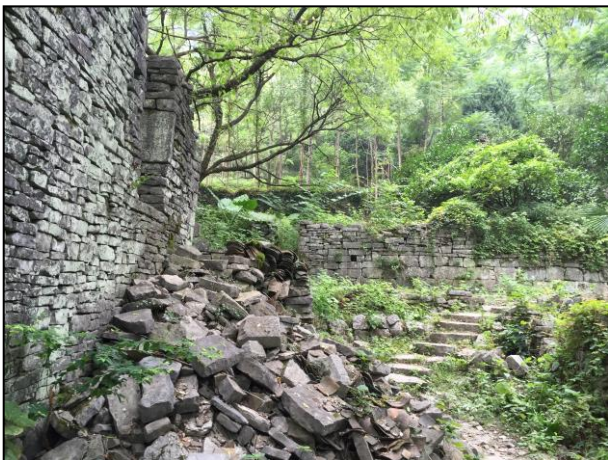


Eventually we came to a gateway in a dry-stone wall with only the stone beam remaining above where the doors would once have hung. Skirting this and following the path we shortly came upon the 'ancient houses'. The area was utterly beautiful in its state of decay, creepers and vegetation re-colonising what was once theirs.





The remains of fifty or sixty buildings were clustered up the mountain and though we really don't know how old they are Adam said he'd been told that they constituted an ancient army garrison lying on the border between two provinces Guangxi and another, and had controlled a mountain pass of strategic significance. The garrison was particularly important and relevant during the communist uprising and the struggle that went on during the late 40's.











I had not known what to expect and prior to our arrival had in mind the low cave-like dwellings of our ancients, but I think 'ancient' is a loose term and 'old' is perhaps what we in the UK might use to describe the buildings. There were signs of more recent habitation, possibly squatters from the looks of the various bits of rubbish left behind in a few of the buildings which still had roofs. Electricity had at some time been connected but it was clear that had long since fallen into disrepair. The water

arrangements and stone collecting pools were a feature from a time when the many springs in the mountainside would have provided all the water necessary for the everyday needs of possibly hundreds, even thousands of soldiers assigned to this outpost. It was a privilege to witness it all and to have the freedom to wander and wonder.

Returning to our scooters we took off again travelling ever further upwards. The intermittent views eventually opened out into the most incredible panorama of fantastic peaks and valleys with the Li Jiang River wending its way far below us. We stopped at a half-built café/restaurant where the owner, a very cheerful woman, persuaded us to enjoy our refreshments out on the veranda which hung over her orchard which sloped away down the mountain and where chickens clucked and scratched happily. That was a veranda with a view! The owner brought us groundnuts, roasted pumpkin seeds and cold tea all free of charge and chatted away with Adam.





I attempted to bite into the shell of a pumpkin seed to get at the tiny seed within but it was hard as hell and I simply couldn't do it. Chinese women eat these things all day – I guess it's a bit like chewing gum in the States – and Adam told us they develop a tiny groove in one of their front teeth which they use to open the seeds. The owner showed me hers. She also persuaded us to go back down the road a couple of hundred metres to where a path leads up a neighbouring mountain to a lookout point. In fact she insisted on coming with us and there told the gatekeeper at the base of the path to give us a discount on our tickets for the walk. No doubt she got a tiny kick-back but we all gained and she was happy.

Off we set, our bodies still dripping sweat and wondering if this was the best decision – Greg had almost decided not to join us it was so hot and uncomfortable, but up the steep steps we went, on and on. And were we glad we did when finally, turning a corner we stepped out onto the lookout platform.

I wish our pictures could have done it more justice. It is the view that appears on the Chinese 20 Yuan note, iconic and fabulous. There was even a gentle, playful little breeze up there, - playful because it kept hiding, letting us drip some more, and then popping out again just to show us what it could do if it wanted to.



Just to make the situation utterly surreal, there on the lookout platform were a young bride and groom, accompanied by their camera team having their wedding photos taken, the fabulous view a backdrop to their finery. It is a common practice in China to seek out a beauty spot for those special pictures and we have seen it many times. Unlike us, they looked supremely cool and comfortable, the bride in a long, flouncy, lilac dress and the groom sporting waistcoat and bow tie. Did they wear them all the way up those baking steps?! There was a loo close to the top so we could only conjecture they had stopped there to change, but even so! The make-up artist would touch them up now and again and shake out the flounces of the dress but it was a very unhurried affair. I would have been yelling 'Get the bloody pictures done, never mind whether the sun's in or out, and get me out of this damn dress!' had I been the bride. But they smiled sweetly and were happy for us to take their picture.



We rode on and yes, just as you suspected when I first mentioned the possibility of rain, the thunder crashed, the lightning flashed and the heavens opened. It was a monsoon deluge and the road became a river. We were drenched to the skin within seconds and there wasn't a shelter for miles and miles. The rain drops were like little daggers and actually stung our faces as we rode into them. Finally we found a little building rather like a large bus shelter alongside a billboard covered in government posters. We





parked and enjoyed a short respite feeling cool at last.

The mists had closed in and the views disappeared but after twenty minutes or so the rain seemed to ease a little and I quoted my dear departed mum: 'It looks a little brighter on the horizon.' My mum was ever the optimist. I think I am a bit more of a realist, however, it seemed the right moment and away we went again.

Adam's scooter has seen better days and is missing some of its leather (plastic) seat covering and so the underlying sponge did what sponges do and our backsides, well, mostly his, sat in a squelchy pool for the remainder of the trip. Soon after setting off from our life-saving bus shelter the storm closed in with even more ferocity and, spying a house just off the road, we made for the drive. Leaping off the bikes we ran for cover under the eaves of the house. Sadly they afforded us little shelter jutting only about eighteen inches from the roof. I think our heads were all that was sheltered and there was absolutely nothing we could do but stand there counting seconds between the great thunder crashes and the magnificent lightning forks. According to this time-worn practice the storm was sometimes right on top of us and sometimes just a few miles away but it was capricious like that little breeze at the lookout and was clearly enjoying our discomfort. We managed to keep our spirits up in spite of it and looked on the bright side: 'At least we're cool,' in fact I had goosebumps.



Again the storm decreased in ferocity just a little and not knowing if it might be set for hours we decided we needed to push on regardless. Sitting behind Adam I did have just a little protection from the needles of rain but anyone who knows him also knows that he's a skinny

little beggar without enough fat on him to excite a starving cannibal, so the protection was minimal to say the least. He was getting very cold with the addition of the wind-chill factor caused by our motion and so I held his tee shirt out in front of him, away from his skin for the remainder of the journey. I think it helped just a wee bit! I didn't know how Greg was faring as he was behind but Adam kept a close eye on him in his wing mirrors. We passed the occasional Chinese man/woman on a scooter – most of them sporting those complete cover-up cape things that drape over not only the rider, and passenger if there is one, but the whole scooter as well. Can well imagine the thoughts of some of them as we passed. Adam admitted to having one back home.

Our third and final stop was at a small bike shed where the already parked bikes disallowed our actually getting under the shelter. Suddenly there was a loud hail from a little further back up the road and we saw a man gesturing for us to come and shelter in his house. We gratefully did and spent the next half hour in their dimly lit front room sitting on the tiny low chairs they use. They were playing the never-ending game of cards and after a little chat about the weather asked Adam if he'd like to join in. He has been caught out like this before I think because he first asked how much they were playing for. Deeming the stakes too high he declined politely but agreed to simply play for the pleasure. He later said he was very glad he hadn't agreed to play for money because the woman in yellow was a bit of a card sharp and he might have lost his shirt if he hadn't lost it already.



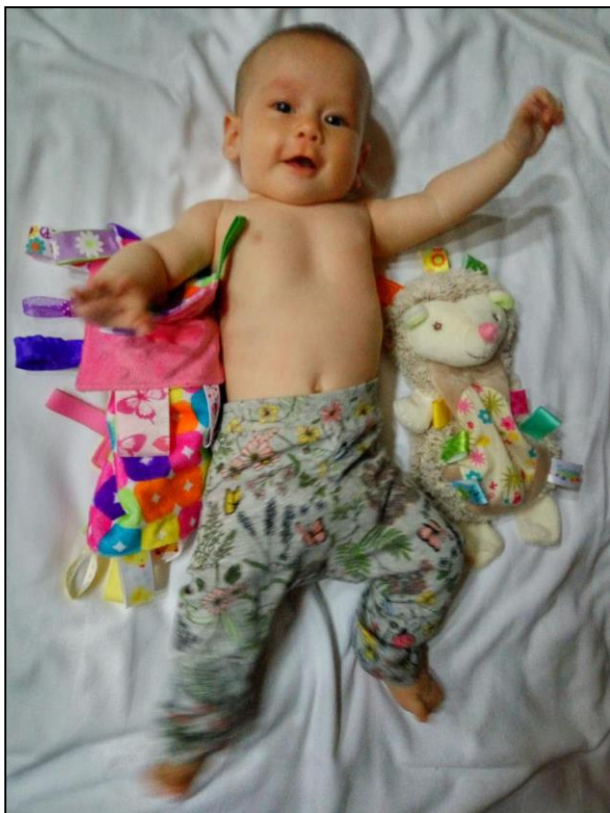


An old granny came in with little boy on her back – a familiar sight - and he had a scraped nose. I made gestures pointing to his nose and putting on a woeful face and she laughed and said he had fallen over. Grandpa, or at least an elderly man, was stretched out on a plank behind us. The plank was wide, perhaps an old door, and supported on trestles. He had his hands behind his head just like you might stretch out on a beach blanket – comfortable as you please.

The river that was the road finally slowed and we made the last ten miles in drizzle, arriving at the outskirts of Yangshuo and a bar/climbing school run by a friend of Adam's. I don't think there's anyone in Yangshuo he doesn't know! We had hot coffee and began to warm up having got decidedly chilled on that last stretch, something I never thought possible in this hot and humid country.

Back at the inn the sun was shining so we showered and had dinner and an early night.

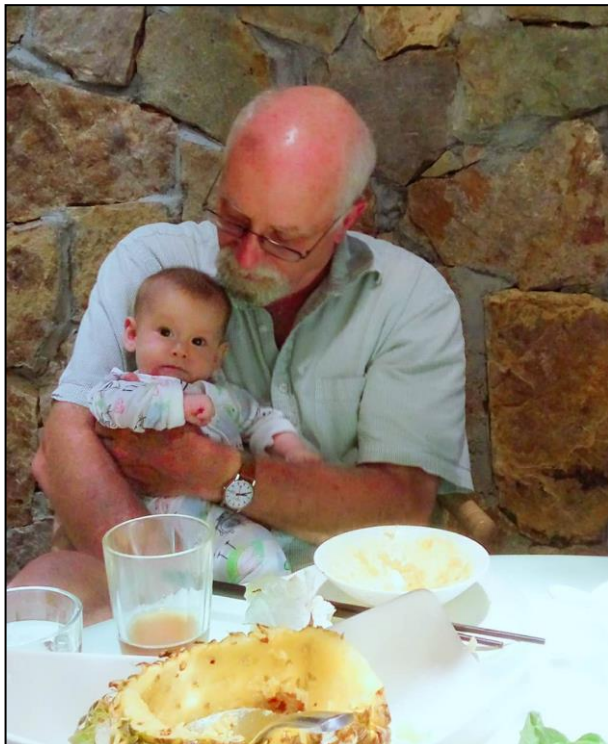
Unfortunately the next day the rain had closed in over Yangshuo and, exhausted from our adventures, we had a lovely lazy day playing with Jessica and chilling out under the pergola. The mosquitos also thought it a good idea to get under the pergola and finding an abundance of fresh flesh they made hay. I ended up indoors in our air-conditioned bedroom and remained there amusing the baby, chatting with Ava, napping and attempting to catch up on my scribbings. I think it was on this occasion we had the 'Jessica Fashion Show' and tried on her every item of clothing we had brought with us including gifts from our dear neighbours who met Adam and Ava shortly before we moved to Moreton Pinkney. She remained happy and co-operative throughout and loved her toys from Nick and Lucy and her 'Lovey' from Great Aunt Sallie!







The next day, very sadly our last, was similar weather-wise but we did go out to eat that evening and had a fabulous dinner at 'Fish Foodie' a rather fancy Chinese restaurant. Adam gently warned of Ava's propensity to order too much and suggested we err on the 'too little' side as we could always order more. In China items arrive on the table when they are cooked, there is no order and one just tucks into whatever appears whenever it appears. So we were tucking into some delicious duck dish and spring rolls (fried and steamed) and sticky rice and a bowl of a very tasty green vegetable and pineapple fried rice and chicken and, and, and the dishes kept on coming! It was an absolutely incredible meal and we really did manage to do it justice, despite Adam's occasional grimaces at Ava when ANOTHER new dish arrived, saving only some of the chicken and a few pieces of sticky fried pork belly for Tally.



It was really sad to be packing to go and leave our new baby and her wonderful parents and the beauty of Yangshuo and all the fun we'd had, but the three days Greg had arranged in Hong Kong were still to be experienced and that did help a little and then of course there was getting back home to see our other little darling and her wonderful parents too. Annabelle had started school while we were away and in her own words it was 'AWESOME!' So we really looked forward to hearing about it all from the horse's mouth and could imagine her bubbling enthusiasm.



More cuddles with Jessica and hugs and kisses and the inevitable tears before a taxi arrived to return us to Guilin Airport from where it took only a two hour flight to transfer us from the mountains and countryside of Hunan Province to the bustling metropolis that is Hong Kong. Talk about a contrast! I have never been a city girl although I do thoroughly enjoy trips up to town for the day and would possibly last up to a week before legging it back to a less congested environment, but HK was something else!

Goodbye Yangshuo and all our darlings 'til we meet again!



## Hong Kong

We were met at the airport by our friend Clive, who used to work with Greg but left for HK to teach at an international school about ten years ago with his lovely wife Jacquie, also a teacher, and their two year old son Owen. I had not been aware that they had parted company after a few years in HK until very recently but both had very kindly offered hospitality and we were delighted to see them and catch up on separate occasions.

Clive has married again and has a dear little daughter called Elise, who we met for a short visit. Clive had warned us, and he was right, Elise has perhaps the best developed lung capacity of any two year old I have ever met and can use it! She was a mini whirlwind in our hotel apartment and the decibel level might have got us kicked out had it been night time. She was very funny and I would have liked to have had more time and a few things with me to amuse her but at least we met her and that was an experience in itself!

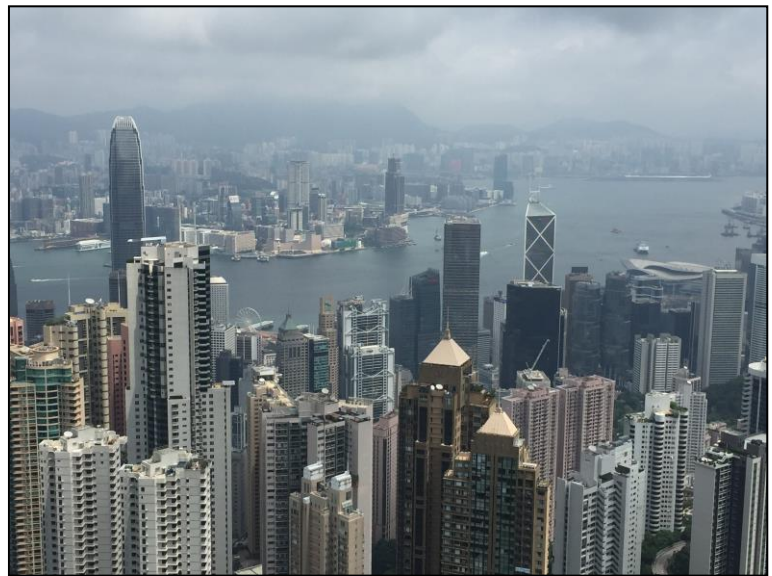
We travelled by Number A10 double-decker bus the forty or so minutes from the airport which sits on a man-made island, over amazing bridges and through long tunnels towards the brightly lit forest of skyscrapers. As we flew in we had seen the bridge that is in the process of being built across the water to the island of Macau – an unbelievable sight! It was all quite astonishing and arriving in the dusk as the lights came on made it even more so.

Clive took us to the hotel he had suggested and kindly booked us into, and arranged to come back after we'd had time for a shower and rest to take us out to dinner. I forget the name of the restaurant but it was very good and we all enjoyed our meals. Later we popped into a bar and met Clive's wife, Jen, who had kindly brought along a map for us that Clive had forgotten. We had a drink together and then they walked us to our hotel.

Many people including Clive had suggested we visit The Peak, the highest point on Hong Kong Island from which you can view the whole of the city and also Kowloon over a short stretch of water. The mountains behind Kowloon hide the vast continent of Mainland China.

After an exceedingly comfortable night we had breakfast at Jaspa's, recommended again by Clive and just around the corner from the hotel, and then boarded a double-decker for The Peak. It wound its way up out of the city and instead of craning our necks to look up at all the incredible skyscrapers that are HK, we were eventually able to look down on it all. The road was so windy we got to view the city from many different angles and were finally deposited at the top. There are two viewing platforms and we just went up the one we saw first. I'm not sure how many escalators we rode to reach the top but each floor on the way was stuffed with shops full of souvenirs and Disney-type paraphernalia and restaurants.

Coming out into the fresh air at the top we were presented with the most magnificent vista and spent a good half hour just looking at the view and watching the other people up there. I don't know how many selfies we managed to invade but I was asked to take a goodly number of pictures for people who'd forgotten their selfie sticks and was also invited to appear in the odd photo too. Why anyone would want my ugly mug in their holiday snaps God only knows but there you go.



We travelled back down from The Peak on a funicular railway built by a Scotsman in the 1880's (Sir Richard MacDonnell). An incredible feat of engineering and a hell of a lot quicker



going down than coming up on the bus. From there we simply spent the afternoon wandering around HK and marvelling at the contrasts.

I had read somewhere that there is greater inequality in earning power and living standards in Hong Kong than anywhere else on earth and I believe it. Magnificent edifices to Mammon abounded in the shape of glittering marble and gilt shopping malls housing outlets such as Victoria Beckham, Stella McCartney and Givenchy and ....well, you think of ANY big name in fashion, jewellery, perfume, bags and it was there. Jacquie later told us that Marks and Sparks, which had been a great hit when first it opened in HK, had recently been 'removed' from one of these state of the art shopping extravaganzas because it wasn't up-market enough!

Walking past the open doors of these places or any one of the myriad gold and jade jewellery shops, one received a gust of super-cool air, - very pleasant and inviting but the cost of all that 'lost' air to the company and environment must be immeasurable. I have to admit that despite judging this madness we did plunge through the doors of one or two of them when the heat got too extreme. I think the very sophisticated and perfectly attired shop assistants realised very quickly that we were not the type of customers to be dropping in for a three thousand HK dollar handbag, however, they were very polite and pointed us in the direction of loos and coffee shops but I still managed to get lost on a couple of occasions amongst the marble and the chic.

By contrast we went to find The Lanes where Jacquie had suggested we might find trinkets of a more Chinese nature to take home. The two lanes ran parallel to each other and were absolutely stuffed with stalls and noise and there was practically no room to move. We bought a couple of table runners in satin embroidered with dragons and suchlike, a couple of fans and little pieces of jewellery for Annabelle and a few little ornaments for hanging on the Christmas tree. I did wish I had made time to shop in Yangshuo where there was more choice of little 'crafty' things to buy, but the haul was sufficient and we added a few mooncakes for the neighbours who were very kindly mowing our lawn while we were away.

The second night we met up with Jacquie at a previously arranged stop on the metro. She looked magnificent and it was great to see her again. She is now deputy head of a large secondary school which she has been instrumental in building up over the years. She lives with her son, Owen, who attends the school and is apparently doing well. We didn't get to see him but Jacquie does come back to the UK most holidays to see her family in Taunton so has promised to bring him to stay as soon as she can. We had a really lovely catch-up evening at a very nice restaurant and Greg and I were both incredibly impressed at how well she has done. A real sweetheart.

I mentioned that I felt my knowledge of HK's history was very scanty and Greg's wasn't a great deal better and so Jacquie suggested we go to the History Museum in Kowloon. So the next morning after breakfast at Jaspa's (we know what we like!) we headed over the water on a Star ferry - they have been running for over a hundred years – and took a taxi to the museum.



I have to say it was a great museum and, after a couple of hours viewing the beautifully staged exhibits and reading volumes of information, I knew just about everything there was to know about Hong Kong from 4,000,000 years ago to the present day. Sadly by the time I walked out the door that vast fund of knowledge had dwindled to about ten percent and now I retain something like two percent when my brain is feeling particularly lucid. Still, it's two percent more than I had before so who's complaining?

I now know just how badly the British behaved towards the Chinese in those early days of plundering the Orient for its many riches (no surprise there then). I know that the bloody British began the opium wars because we didn't have much of anything the Chinese wanted in exchange for all their goodies and so we thoughtfully brought opium from India and ruined the lives of thousands upon thousands of people then attacked them when they later destroyed the opium we'd kindly brought them all that way. I learned about the Japanese invasion and what happened in Hong Kong during the war and then after it, although of the Cultural Revolution and the rise of communism I learned nothing. Funny that.

We spent our last evening with Clive and took him to a small, newly opened restaurant owned by an acquaintance of Adam's and on his suggestion. He had said he'd heard it was a 'bit pricey' but we were prepared to push the boat out on our last evening. Well, the best I can say for it is that the staff were very good and smiley. It was one of those places where you pay extra, a lot extra for smaller portions, minute portions. Suffice to say the tiny miniscule portions were very tasty indeed but a quick swallow was all you got. We left there considerably poorer but had a couple of margaritas around the corner with Clive and returned to our hotel feeling about ready for a satisfying meal.





We caught the Number A10 bus from around another corner the next morning and were delivered efficiently to the airport where we had breakfast and waited the couple of hours for our flight. I was reading Sue Perkins' autobiography on my iPad and thoroughly enjoying it and letting out the occasional guffaw which annoyed Greg just a little. Everything went very smoothly although I had kind of hoped we'd see a few more signs of the typhoon which had been heading towards HK. We knew it wasn't due to make landfall until the evening of the day we left but it had actually veered north overnight so there wasn't even a little bit of wind!

Twelve hours in bigger seats than we're used to (for some reason unknown to us we were in the 'bonus' economy seats) and three films plus a bit of guffawing, saw us landing oh so smoothly at London, Heathrow. Called Nick to tell him we were in the baggage hall and he told us he's left dinner and a few basics outside our door so we didn't need to call in at Tesco, Banbury. What a star! A quick trip to the car park and we were headed for home. How Greg managed to stay awake I'm not sure but thankfully he did and we were glad to see the Moreton Pinkney village signs. A delicious dinner care of Charlie Bingham and our lovely Nick and bed - aahh.

Goodnight.



Miscellaneous photos

