

This summer holiday, in search of different scenery, we travelled East, exchanging the hot dry desert and clear blue sunny skies for hot humid days, often under a grey cover of cloud and pollution. The combination of going East and holidays also meant a big increase in fellow travellers and some challenging moments trying to get bus or train tickets and dealing with people in the "service" industry.



In China, you can buy train tickets up to ten days in advance, or a bit more if you can do it on-line, or less for reasons unknown to us. Leaving Zhangye we did it with the help of a Chinese friend who ordered tickets by phone to get us to Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province, a mere six hours away. This was as far as we could get, booking four days ahead. His advice: "Start planning early". Going East, see the sea, visit interesting historic and beautiful places and go back to Zhangye through Inner Mongolia and deciding our next moves on the road, was maybe a bit too vague. So we would plan one or two stops ahead, getting tickets to the next place on the day we arrived somewhere. If that proved to be impossible there was always the option of going by bus.



To get out of Lanzhou, this is exactly what we had to do. The bus driver of an overnight sleeper-bus told us to buy the tickets in the morning on the day of departure. So we got up early, went to the bus station and saw on the big screen that there were still enough tickets left for the 19 hour bus ride to Chengdu, only to be told that there were no tickets. "Mei you", "Don't have", was all the unhelpful overworked staff could tell us. By now we have been in China long enough to know that "Mei you" usually means "Too difficult, I have no time for this", so a helpful local was soon found to buy tickets for us. Money had already exchanged hands when the ticket seller spotted foreigners and all of a sudden the tickets were no longer available. In the end, the bus driver, no doubt a man with connections, bought us the tickets while we stayed well out of the picture.

The bus looked a bit like the old photos of opium dens. Three rows of narrow bunk beds, with the headrests under an angle to fit the feet of the passenger behind. That is if that passenger were a five foot Chinese. Not much room for our western legs or size 12 feet. During daylight we saw stunning scenery through the large windows, but the ride was made uncomfortable by the sanitary stops that were too few and too far between and a long way from "sanitary". I leave it to your imagination how bowel and stomach cramps that called for some unscheduled stops added to our discomfort. At least trains have toilets on the go.



Trains come in different categories: fast, slow, or somewhere in between, with air-conditioning or without. There are hard and soft seats, and hard and soft sleepers. Hard seats are ok to travel for shorter distances, especially when the train is not crowded, but as these carriages also allow people to stand in the aisles when all the seats are sold, those toilets on the go are a little difficult to get to. For

long train rides during the day the soft seats are not only softer, they are wider and give you more room to stretch your legs. However, it is a matter of availability and most of the time, even for a 27 hour trip, we had to opt for the only lightly padded hard seats, carefully claiming our own bit of personal space and every now and then lifting the head of our sleeping neighbour off our shoulder.

Travel guides tell you that when you get a hard sleeper, the best bed to book is the middle one, as the top one is too close to the ceiling and the bottom one is shared by other travellers during the day. There are two fold-away stools in the aisle for each door-less compartment and they are used by the four people who have the middle and top bunks. Once, we were only able to get two top bunks for a 14 hour journey during the day, and we alternated between the seats in the aisle and the bottom beds. A young couple with a two year old son kindly offered to share both their space and their food with us. The family left before us and their place was taken by another passenger, who immediately claimed every inch of his allocated space and made himself comfortable for the Chinese mandatory afternoon nap. What he did not know and we would not have dared to tell him even if he had been friendly and we had been fluent in Chinese, is that we had witnessed on more than one occasion that the cute, split pants wearing two year old had not been exactly "house-trained". The guide books are right, although they should also mention to check for wet spots before you bury your head in your pillow and snuggle up under the blanket.



When you travel on a soft seat you are looking at the back of the seats in front of you, but in the hard seat section you are sitting face to face in groups of four or six with a small table in between. On long trips even the novelty of looking at foreigners with strange blue eyes and hairy arms will be wearing off after a while and often we end up having conversations and sometimes exchange phone numbers or email addresses with friendly people who have added interest to our travel in China.