

The Golden Hour

- Aukje Both & Ferry van Mansum



When you go to China you know that, apart from you and other foreign tourists, there will be around 1.3 billion Chinese in the country. So you have to expect queues and crowds and few quiet places, especially during holidays. Tourism is a part of China that is under development. Areas of natural beauty and those of cultural or historic importance are all given a rating, with AAAAA spots being the best and therefore the busiest. Wide approach roads, spanned by huge colourful Chinese gates, lead to enormous car parks where tour buses unload their passengers who will follow the flag of

their portable microphone-wearing tour guide. Once past the ticket checkpoint, soothing music coming from artificial rocks will lead you to an electric buggy that will take you the last few hundred metres to your destination.

The trick to avoid the crowds is to walk the last bit if it is not too far, even though hustling English-speaking tour guides might tell you that you will not be able to find the entrance yourself. Then go at your own pace, turn a few corners and you might find yourself almost alone, taking in the sights. Going to one of the less famous places will also guarantee you a more private holiday experience. Avoiding Chinese holiday season is another way to ensure you can take photos without the ever-posing Chinese tourist in front of the attraction. Getting to a place early does not always work because Chinese are early risers.

A much better chance for some peace, space and quiet is to visit places at the “golden hour”, the time that most Chinese prefer to spend with their eyes closed. Lunch is at 12 sharp, and immediately after that, until about two o’clock, life slows down for the Chinese. If they are not at home, anything will do as a place to take a nap.

In shops you see staff on make-shift beds in the back, or slumped over the counter, using their arms as a pillow, no doubt the most junior amongst them the unlucky one to attend to the few that do not need, or want, to take a time-out in the middle of the day. Restaurant staff curl up on the chairs under the tables after the last customers have finished their lunch and it is hard to find a bench in the park in Summer without someone stretched out on it.





The afternoon nap: our students do it, our Chinese colleagues do it, truck drivers and even policemen in the street do it. It seems we are just about the only people in China who still don't and it is hard to explain why this is not a custom in New Zealand or Europe. "How can you concentrate on your study, or work in the afternoon, if you don't sleep for an hour or so after lunch?" is a question we are often asked.



Of course we don't have a two and a half hour lunch break and we want our classes to be over shortly after three o'clock but, even so, we think there are few students back home who would list "sleeping" as one of the things they do in their leisure-time, unless it is sleeping in late in the weekend or holidays. However, in a lesson we taught around free-time last week, many of our Chinese students ranked it as one of their favourite "activities" and all agreed that this is what most Chinese people like to "do".

So, if you are in China and really like to be active, in the real sense of the word, eat before twelve, or well after, and plan your sight-seeing or shopping during those golden hours.