



Taking The Night Train From Beijing To Jinan

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It was not the first time I had been to Beijing. On my previous trips, I had done the tourist sights such as the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven.

This time, I was going to see the Great Wall and I had taken a full day out of my schedule to do so.



The writer in the hills above Beijing

The car drove me from the airport down the long straight road with tall sad-looking pine trees on one side and on the other, huge hoardings showing happy peasants labouring in the fields and soldiers waving their guns underneath giant revolutionary slogans.

Yes, this was a few decades ago – back in the day when they hadn't been replaced by Gucci/Dior/Armani billboards.

There was hardly any traffic on the roads in those days either. Just official cars and buses and taxis such as the one I was travelling in.

Instead, there were thousands upon thousands of bicycles, and everyone riding or walking, wearing the Mao suit: a high-collared jacket and flat cap. You had a choice of two colours: blue or green.

The Palace Hotel was opened by the British in the 1930s; then the French contributed a section; and after that, it was the turn of the Russians before the Chinese finished it off. It is the architectural equivalent of the camel.

I walked in and presented my reservation print out, as we did in those days.

"No rooms available."

"I have a confirmed reservation," I insisted, waving the paper under the desk clerk's nose.

"No rooms available."

It was early evening, already dark in the dead of winter. At that time there were only a limited number of hotels in which foreigners could stay.

"Get me the manager," I demanded.

After a brief conference, I was told that there was a room for me at a place called the Ritan Hotel. I had never heard of it. They gave me directions and I walked out in the darkness.

The Ritan Hotel was a seedy third-rate flophouse but better than nowhere. I presented a note from the Palace Hotel.

"No rooms available."

In the corner of the tiny reception area was an ancient sagging sofa. I parked my small suitcase, lay down on the sofa and said, "In that case, I shall sleep here for the night."

After another hurried conference, I was led up a flight of stairs to a door which said, "Texas Oilfield Services." The door was opened and inside I saw a desk, a chair, filing cabinets and another sofa.

"But this is someone's office," I noted in bewilderment.

They answered by leaving the room and closing the door behind them.

I took off my shoes, lay down on the sofa, pulled my heavy coat over myself and fell into an exhausted sleep. The next morning, I was awoken by an angry shout from a towering American who looking about two metres high and two metres wide. They build 'em big in Texas.

"What the %@#! are you doing in my office?" he yelled.

When I explained why I was there he started to laugh and told me where to find the communal shower and toilets. We shared a meagre breakfast and I went off to my meeting



Confucian Temple, Beijing

My main purpose for being in Beijing was to sign a contract to buy 3,000 tonnes of steel plates from a Chinese steel mill. In those days official meetings were always the same. The Chinese party would sit behind a huge desk upon which were strategically placed one sheet of paper, a pencil, and an ancient black telephone which never rang.

I would introduce myself and ask how they were.

The answer was always the same. "*Hěn máng*" ("Very busy").

My meeting lasted till lunchtime and then all through the interminable afternoon. Eventually, the contract was signed and then began the second part of the ritual: the banquet.

I had hired a room for 10 people and at 5:50 pm they all filed in. Two I knew. One I had met briefly. Seven I had never seen before and would never see again.

By each place-setting were six glasses. One was for water. The others were for beer, white wine, red wine, brandy and the foul Chinese liquor called *Mou Tai* which tastes and smells like someone's socks and is about 60 per cent alcohol – that's twice as strong as a good whisky.

The first dish arrived and someone leapt to his feet, seized a glass and wished me and everyone else eternal peace and friendship.

"*Gambe!*" he shouted, which roughly translates as "Bottoms up!" And so we started.

This went on for two hours.

Finally, it was over. There was nothing at all to do in Beijing at night. No coffee shops, bars, late-night restaurants so I went to my hotel room (I had made peace with the Palace Hotel by then) and went to sleep.

In the morning I took a hotel car to a place called Badaling. I left the car to wait for me and walked up into the hills. It was very cold and crisp and clear. Beijing is on the fringes of a desert and it hardly ever snows

even in the depths of winter.

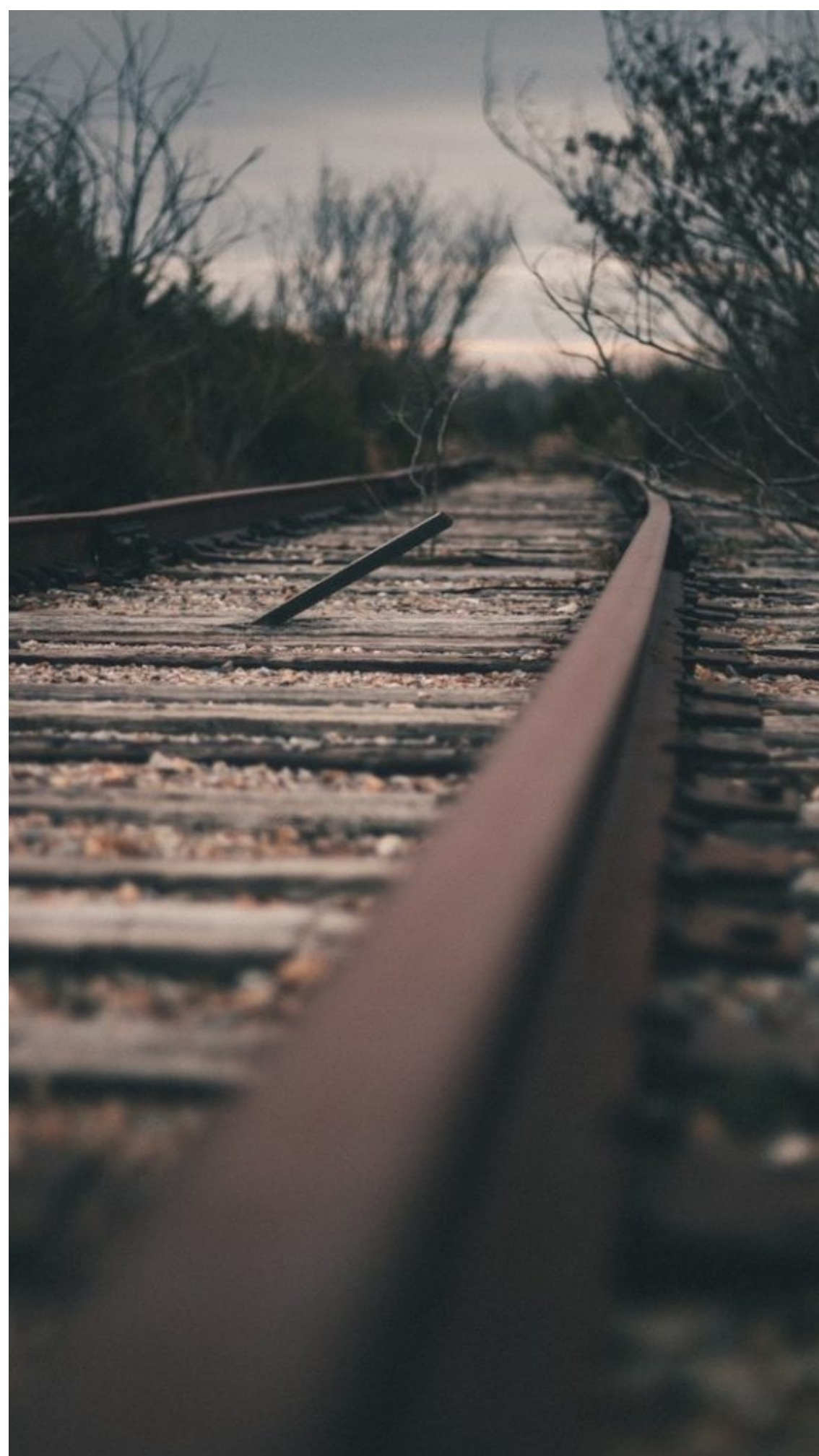


On the Great Wall in a rather distinctive ushanka hat

I took a few photos then walked to the Great Wall where I bought myself a Russian-style ushanka hat with earflaps that tie under the chin. I spent a couple of hours on the Wall, had a late lunch of Chinese dumplings in a workers-style canteen where the cigarette-smoke was so thick you could hardly see across the room. Then I went back to my hotel, picked up my suitcase and started out on the second part of my journey.

I was bound for Jinan in Shandong Province, the location of the steel mill that would manufacture the steel I had bought. There were two ways to get to Jinan. One was by air but I had no faith then in internal Chinese air travel. The other way was by rail. It took 10 hours so I had booked a sleeper on the night train.

I had been advised to take a guide to Beijing Railway Station and they were absolutely correct: I would never have found the right train. It was a cavernous warehouse of a place, pitch dark with thousands of people milling around sitting or sleeping on benches and on the floor.



And so the journey begins... or ends

There seemed to be no signs of any kind. How my guide found his way I have no idea but 15 minutes later I was sitting on a top bunk in a four-berth sleeper. Inside the carriage were one small table, one chair, a flask

of hot water and four metal cups. I used my coat as a blanket and as the train pulled out of the station I fell asleep. This lasted for 10 minutes.

I awoke grabbing hold of the flimsy board which was all that kept me from falling out of the bunk onto the floor. This happened every time the train stopped and the train stopped every 10 minutes.

Eventually, I gave up on sleep altogether. I had brought with me a bottle of whisky as a gift for the steel mill manager. I climbed out of bed, sat on the chair, unlocked my suitcase, took out the bottle and poured myself a shot.

The other bunks were occupied by a Chinese and two Koreans. Two minutes later they were all sitting on the bottom bunk staring at me. I took the metal cups, poured them each a slug and very soon, despite the fact that my Chinese was rudimentary and I spoke no Korean we were all best friends for life. After that, I climbed back into my bunk and slept like a log.

I was met at the station, taken to my hotel and then to the steel mill.

It was like something from a Victorian nightmare. In the West, it would have been shut down at once. There seemed to be no safety gear at all, not even hard hats and boots. The furnaces yawned open, eye-achingly bright and sending great blasts of heat across the factory. Huge ladles of molten steel whisked overhead, utterly unprotected.

The steel I had bought was for a very unsophisticated purpose and the end product seemed satisfactory. At 11.30 am it was time for lunch which turned out to be – yes – a banquet. There were two very large Chinese sitting opposite me in work garb, obviously straight off the factory floor. And their purpose was to drink. We stood to drink endless times, wished each other lifelong friendship and at 2 pm I was taken back to my hotel. I had until 5:30 pm to attempt to sober up.

Opposite my hotel was a long steep hill with a temple at the summit. Unlike in Beijing, it had snowed heavily in Jinan and I set off to climb the hill in the snow. It was utterly deserted. At the top, I was given water by some monks and gratefully drank about a gallon.

Then I slipped and slid my way back down, showered and changed and went to meet my new friends for – yes – another banquet.

As the meal – and the drinks – progressed the waiter, with a great flourish placed on my plate six large black objects, complete with little feet and little wings. My interpreter told me how lucky I was to be in Jinan at that time of year to sample the famous Shandong Black Beetles.

Now I pride myself in my ability to eat most things and in China I have eaten jellyfish, deep-fried scorpions, chickens' feet, sea slugs and the revolting bear's paw. But I wasn't feeling at my best and looking at the beetles on my plate I just couldn't do it.

I leapt to my feet, grabbed a glass and wished everyone eternal peace and friendship and casually slipped the beetles into my napkin and into my jacket pocket. We sat down and the interpreter said to me, "Mr Hughes, why did you put those beetles in your pocket?"

"Because," I said, trying to think on my feet as fast as I could, 'because... er... because..we can't get Famous Shandong Black Beetles in Hong Kong and my wife loves them. I am taking them back for her!"

Solemnly he stood, told my story and the steel mill manager clapped his hands. The waiter appeared with a large jar full of Famous Shandong Black Beetles just for me.

They were ceremonially handed to me, many more drinks were downed and at 9 pm, I was poured onto the train for the return journey.

The conductor indicated a top bunk. I told him I desperately needed a bottom bunk. Negotiations continued until we were both satisfied. I had my bottom bunk and the conductor had a large jar of Famous Shandong Black Beetles.

I lay down thankfully and 10 hours later I woke in Beijing.



Glenys Nellist

Entertaining read, Trevor, and great photos.

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