

Sabbaticals in China – Introduction

As we reported in the [Winter 2007 Integram](#), Owen Byer and Deirdre Smeltzer each spent a sabbatical semester in China during the 2005-06 academic year. Owen and his family lived in Nanchong, Sichuan province, from August through December of 2005; Deirdre and her family took their place for February through July of 2006.

The purpose of these sabbaticals was three-fold:

1. to experience the Chinese culture;
2. to gain new perspective by teaching English to Chinese college students under the China Educational Exchange program;
3. to make progress on a geometry textbook currently being written by Owen, Deirdre, and a colleague at the University of Delaware, Dr. Felix Lazebnik.

The geometry book, while not quite complete, was used last semester as the text for Deirdre's geometry course, so goal number three was achieved.

For the other goals, judge for yourself based on these stories and photos.

- [Byer Photos](#)
- [Byer Stories](#)
- [Smeltzer Photos](#)
- [Smeltzer Stories](#)

If you have questions or comments, e-mail them to Owen or Deirdre.

Sabbatical in China – Fall Semester

Byer Family Photos



Lily, Barb, Owen, and Cam



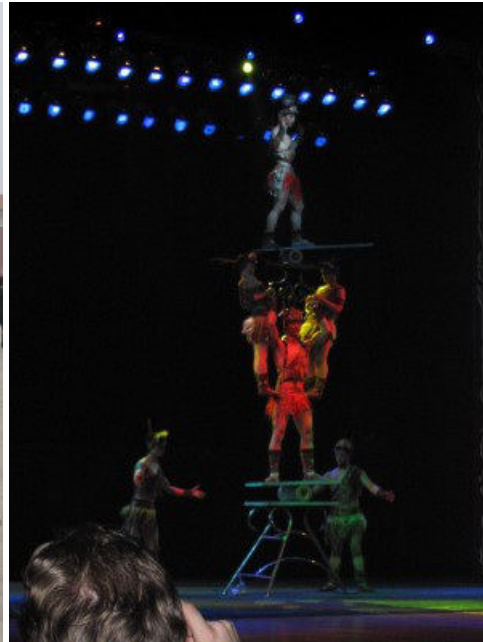
start with a little training in the language and culture,



then it's time for work,



a little basketball for Owen,



some sight-seeing and recreation,



a birthday celebration,



shopping at the outdoor market,



making friends through food and work,



and all too soon it's Christmas and the semester is over.

Sabbatical in China – Fall Semester

Byer Family Stories

Owen sent us a number of stories during the fall. His stories show that even ordinary tasks can become an adventure when you are in another country.

- **The Haircut** – A simple haircut, what could be easier? (from the Winter 2007 Integram)
- **The Hospital** – Getting sick is never fun, but it can be an adventure.

The Haircut

I went in for a hair cut yesterday. I was motioned over to the wash basin, where I tried to explain that I had already washed my hair, but then I remembered that in many shops they find it easier to cut the hair when it is wet, so I obliged. Barber #1 lay me down and gave me a lathery shampoo along with a scalp rub. Then I was ushered over to the chair for the haircut by Barber #2. He did a fine job, although it took quite awhile. I even succeeded in explaining how short I wanted it cut and that I did not want the sideburns he tried to leave me with. So, despite the fact that I had already been there for 40 minutes (rather than the 15 minutes I can get at the Hair Corral back in Harrisonburg), I was ready to leave happy.

But, no. Barber #1 again indicated that I should go back to the wash basin! What on earth? But I complied. I guess they wanted to wash out all of the little hairs that invariably get left on the top of my head after a haircut. The water was warm and it didn't take too long, so I was still happy as I jumped up ready to go do something important, like catch wasps with chopsticks.

But, no again! Barber #3 motioned me back over to the chair again, waving a hair dryer. I don't think my hair has ever been touched by a hair dryer; I wondered if maybe something akin to Samson losing his strength when his hair was cut would happen to me if went through with their plan. However, since I couldn't think of any personal characteristic that seemed so important that I couldn't lose it for this experience, I obliged again. But, I must have been fresh meat for Barber #3, because he didn't just dry my hair. After his obvious initial disappointment that I said "bu yao" (meaning "I don't want that") when he offered to use gel in my hair, he proceeded to fuss over it with a comb, teasing it this way and that. It was sometime during this second turn in the chair that I realized that I wasn't getting a haircut—I was having my hair styled! Of course, many of you probably do this regularly, but it was a new experience for me. Well, once my hour was up, they must have thought they earned their money, so they let me go. I must admit that other than being a bit poofy on top, I thought it looked pretty good. So, what did I pay for this entire experience? Five Chinese RMB, which is the equivalent of about 62 cents in the USA. And to think that I paid \$7 for a haircut right before we came to China so that I wouldn't have to get it cut for a while once we got here!

— Owen Byer

The Hospital

On Saturday afternoon, October 22, I started to not feel so well, and by Sunday I knew I was sick. Unlike my previous illness, this one was in my head. By this I mean that I had a fever instead of a belly ache, not that I was suffering from hypochondria. On Sunday night I called fellow CEEer Holly and asked her to let my students in Monday's classes know I wouldn't be there due to illness (and of course, to give them the homework assignment!). Sure enough, by Monday morning my temperature was 102 degrees Fahrenheit (which I hope is about 39 degrees

Celsius, because that is what I've been telling everyone).

Word spread quickly and many of our Chinese friends called or stopped by to wish me well and offer suggestions. Several students even wrote me and said that they missed me (which I think is the Chinese way of saying "I'm glad we didn't have class today."). One of our friends stopped by Monday morning and said I needed to take some Chinese medicine; I didn't argue, despite the awful smell that had permeated our apartment the time he was here to mix a brew for his own ailment. After all, I'm here to experience the culture, right? Off to the drug store he went to return quickly with two different six packs of dried ingredients, which I was to mix together three times per day and drink as hot tea. I was a bit skeptical of how I had just spent 10 yuan (\$1.25), but it was actually pretty good! It reminded me of Postum, which I haven't had in about 30 years. I figured with, rest, water, and this Postum, I would be back on my feet again soon. Miss Cao, the assistant in the foreign affairs office whose main duty (I think) is to make sure that foreign teachers in the English department are being taken care of, called and asked if I wanted to go to the doctor. I said it probably wasn't necessary, but I would call her the next day if I wasn't feeling better.

Fast forward to Tuesday afternoon... My fever was again back up to 102, so I called Miss Cao. She said she would take me to the college's hospital (which is where one goes to see a doctor here—they do not seem to have private practices). She arrived shortly to escort me there, which was very nice. The hospital was about a mile away, but we set out on foot, which probably wasn't such a good idea. She let me know that the medicine I was taking was useless, but I'm not sure how she knew that—after all, a future doctor had purchased it for me! Perhaps she based her assessment on the fact that I'd been taking it for two days and I was still sick?

When we arrived, I paid the customary 2 yuan (25 cents), which got us our appointment ticket and doctor consultation. Actually, all I had was a Y100, which they didn't want, so Miss Cao graciously paid for me. Let me say something here about this hospital. Our college is a medical college (by the time we leave, I hope to have an understanding of why there are English majors here), so its hospital is considered the premier hospital in this part of Sichuan province. Peasants from the country come a long way to receive treatment here. This might explain why it only cost 2 yuan to get an appointment and also why I passed several large baskets of live chickens in the hall on our way to the office.

We eventually found our examination room. I was very grateful to have Miss Cao to help me, because all of the rooms were labeled in Chinese. I peered in through the open door to see a doctor (I assumed, based on his white coat) talking with patient #1. Patient #2 was patiently waiting at the same table examining x-rays. Soon, patient #3 (me) was waiting impatiently in the fourth chair in the room. I knew privacy was not an issue because I had been to the hospital with Cameron before and knew that the examination rooms doubled as waiting rooms. The rooms do have a sheet that presumably can be pulled in front of the bed if the exam is deemed to require such measures. Soon patient #2 chimed in with a comment; evidently the two were there together, so I suddenly became Patient #2!

The couple soon departed and I moved to the former seat of Patient #1. The doctor spoke to me in Chinese, I assume asking me what was wrong. Miss Cao spoke for me, as I had given her a brief synopsis on the way over. He wanted to know how long I had felt ill (3 days), whether I had a headache (a little bit) and whether I had a fever (39 degrees Celsius). While he was jotting down my name (By the way, I'm on a first name basis at the hospital—they don't know my last name, my S.S.#, my employer, my height, my weight, my insurance provider, or who to call in case of an emergency.) and some Chinese characters, I used my dictionary and tried to explain that perhaps I had bronchitis. He nodded, and said in broken English, "Yes you have a cold." I said, "No, not a cold, more serious," as he beckoned us out. I was bewildered; he had not examined me at all! He hadn't even earned his quarter! Wasn't he going to make me say "Ahhh" while peering down my throat or use the stethoscope that I observed strewn across his desk? Perhaps he smelled the Postum that I had gulped down immediately prior to coming to see him, coming from my mouth of unbrushed teeth, and he didn't want to get near me. But then I remembered from my previous visit with Cameron for his planter's wart that Doctor #1 only provided the preliminary diagnosis and that Doctor #2 would provide the treatment (or in this case, hopefully a more thorough investigation). On the way out, Miss Cao told me my illness was serious. I didn't know what that meant, really. Of course, if an English speaking doctor had told me that I would have been alarmed, but I have gotten used to the fact that when one is speaking her second language, she must grope for words and the one that is ultimately selected might not convey the intended meaning. At least, this is what I hoped!

So, up and down the stairs we went in search of (I thought) Dr. #2. During the journey, I asked what the doctor was going to do, and Miss Cao stumbled a bit before coming up with the word “transfusion!” My shock lasted briefly and I quickly decided that she meant they were going to draw blood for testing. I was starting to tire a bit, so, being the man, I suggested we stop and ask for directions. A kind young doctor (#3) smoking profusely in an empty exam room pointed us downstairs. Actually, he probably said something in Chinese, but I was only looking for hand signals. Off we went again, aided at one intersection by a Chinese/English sign blocking the way, where the English read “Pedestrian Halt.” Downstairs, we asked for help again and were pointed toward the second door on the right. But this office had a boulder on the floor and a big hole in the back wall! So, we went through door #1 instead, which also had a hole in the back wall. Fortunately this hole was in the form of a door, which led us out of the building and into a courtyard.

On the way to the new building, Miss Cao said that Doctor #1 had said I should stay in bed for 3 days. When I told her I had already been in bed for three days (only a slight exaggeration), she said maybe it should be for another three days. I laughed and didn’t think much about it at the time.

In the new building Miss Cao suggested I take a rest while she made some inquiries. I gratefully sank into a chair in a large empty waiting room and propped my feet up on the chair in front of me. Momentarily, I became aware of a constant pounding and ringing in my head. It might have been my illness, but I rather suspect that it was due to the worker I spied standing on a ledge in an adjacent building, knocking out the concrete wall with a large sledgehammer. I trusted that he would stop before getting to a supporting post!

After about ten minutes Miss Cao took me down the hall where she informed me I must now pay for the services. We were not with Dr. #2 after all, but rather with a staff member who wanted 500 yuan (over \$60)! I was alarmed for two reasons: 1) This seemed a bit high for a blood test, compared to the prices I’d become accustomed to in China, and 2) I only had 200 yuan in my pocket. I asked what it was for and Miss Cao informed that this was the initial fee for being admitted to the hospital for three days! I learned later that I would be refunded a portion of that after my stay. I quickly backed us out of the line and suggested that Miss Cao call someone who could better explain what was going on. I wasn’t going to stay in a hospital for three days when the doctor hadn’t even examined me!

She called Mr. Jin (another member of the foreign affairs office) on her cell phone and talked furiously for several moments before handing me the phone. I was slightly annoyed that she kept turning her back to me during her conversation (as if I could understand her better if I could see her face!) while I was trying to show her the word “antibiotic” in my dictionary. Anyway, Mr. Jing thought I was concerned about the money, but I explained that that was not the case. I simply wanted to know on what basis they thought I should be in the hospital, when all I needed was an antibiotic. However, due to the poor phone connection and language barrier I didn’t really understand much of what Mr. Jing said, but I did determine that the word Miss Cao had sought was injection, not transfusion. I then told Miss Cao that I could go get an injection, but I wasn’t going to stay in the hospital.

So, back to Dr. #1 we went, where it appeared that I was now Patient #4. While waiting, I finally succeeded in informing (using my dictionary, of course) Ms. Cao that all I needed was an antibiotic; she replied that we did not need to see a doctor to obtain that, which of course didn’t help matters at that point! She apologized for wasting my time, cut in line, and began speaking to Dr. #1 as if I were Patient #1. During this time, Mr. Jin surprisingly arrived to help, decked out in sweat pants and carrying two badminton rackets. Another flurry of words were exchanged and soon Dr. #1 was smiling wryly (I wish I knew what he was thinking) and writing a prescription.

We went downstairs to have the prescription filled. Unfortunately they do not have copays in China, so I had to pay the entire amount of 116.2 yuan (about \$15) for three different medicines. Supposedly they work together, but I still don’t know what they are supposed to treat. Each is to be taken three times a day, which means I had enough to last for 2 – 4 days, depending on the medicine. It struck me as odd that I had six pills of one type, eight of the second type, and twelve of the third type, when they were supposed to work in tandem (kind of like buying a pack of ten hotdogs along with a pack of eight buns).

On our walk home, Mr. Jin explained to me that in Chinese medicine the doctor often chooses a diagnosis based on the patient’s description of his symptoms. Hence there was no need to examine my throat, listen to my breathing, or take my temperature. I said this wouldn’t work in sue-happy America!

I arrived home in good spirits (really!) about two hours after departing and immediately popped three of the pills. I then took my temperature and discovered that, despite all the exercise, it had dropped to 101.5 degrees. Maybe there was something to this Chinese medicine after all!

Now, I would be remiss if I let this story leave a negative impression of health care in China in general, or this hospital in particular. Certainly the examination rooms and facilities are not on par with those in a typical American doctor's office. However, I have been assured (and I believe) that the medical care here is quite good. The doctors are very well trained and safe hygiene is indeed practiced where necessary. Much of what I experienced is certainly just due to cultural differences and should not be taken as a negative reflection on the quality of care here.

— Owen Byer

If you want more of Owen's stories, just ask.

Sabbatical in China – Spring Semester Smeltzer Family Photos



Deirdre started her journey alone





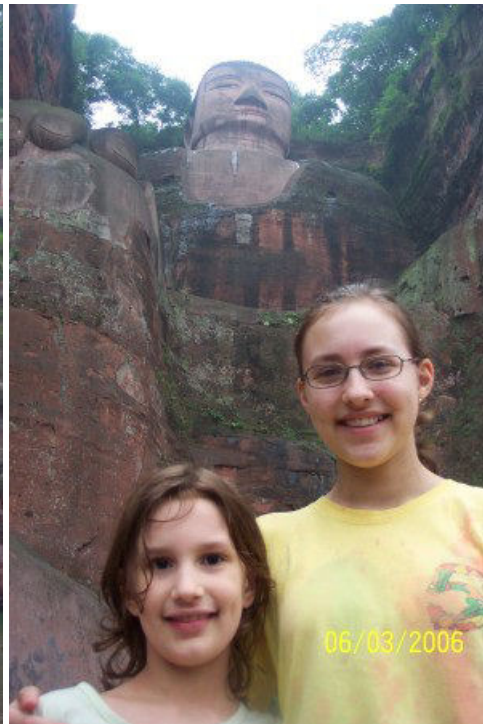
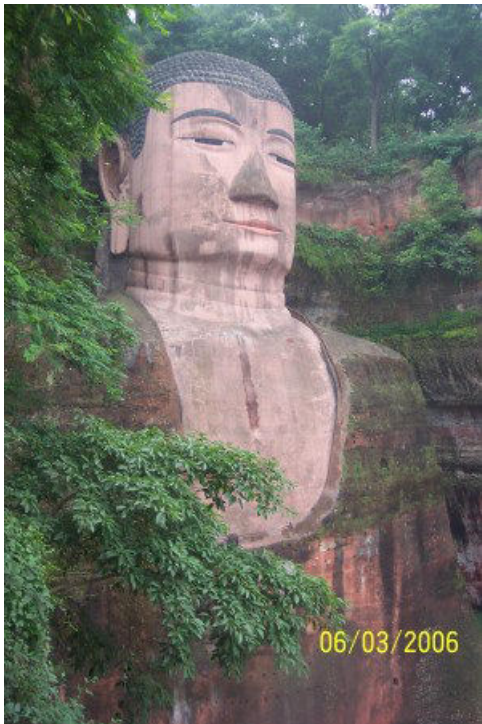
and started work right away.



Teaching, making cookies, and exploring the city



passed the time until Meg and Claire arrived.



After a little travel to see the sights,



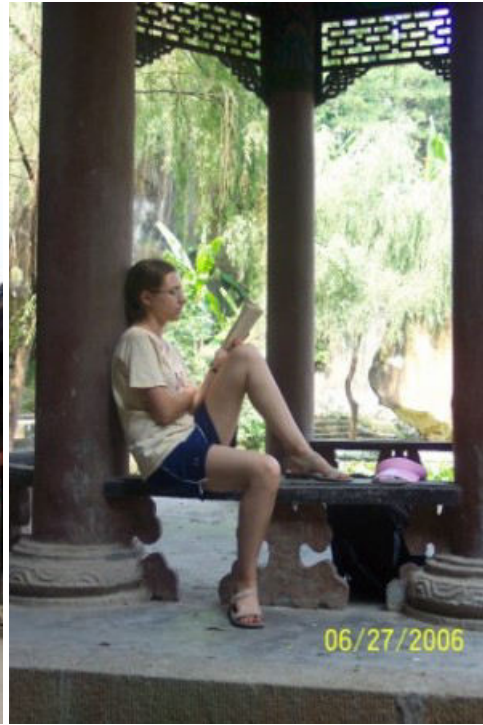
it's time for food and games with new friends



in a new place with new customs.



Graduation and farewell parties mark the end of semester,



but it takes a visit to Lang Zhong



Lijiang,



the Great Wall,



and a few restaurants with with the whole family to make the journey complete.

Sabbatical in China – Spring Semester

Smeltzer Family Stories

We have a number of stories from the Smeltzer family, and even some poetry from Meg, age 13.

- **A Chinese Wedding** – A report by Claire, age 9. (from the Winter 2007 Integram)
- **Crazy English** – Meg tells of an unusual way to spend a holiday.
- **Hot Pot** – Meg celebrates time spent with new friends.
- **Giant Pandas** – China’s panda mania seems to have touched Meg too.
- **Leshan and Emei** – Sherwyn reports on some of the first family outings.
- **Langzhong** – When not at EMU, Deirdre seems to confuse exams with vacations.
- **Lijiang** – The initial problems on this trip were worth it.

A Chinese Wedding

Most of a Chinese wedding is eating. Most of an American wedding is the actual getting married part. When we walked in the door there were some people at the door, and they gave two pieces of candy per person. Then we went inside and sat down at a table (there were a lot of round tables that people sat at). There was a smallish plate in the middle of a table, with peanuts, sunflower seeds, and many assorted candies and snacks on it (as sort of an appetizer). Everybody talked and ate from the little plate. It was very noisy. Then, after a long time there was a small ceremony in which the bride and the groom went up an aisle to a platform while some confetti was flying into the air. (There was no flower girl or ring bearer or bridesmaids.) After that there was LOOOOOOOOTTSSS of food. It filled the whole table and there were three layers of plates of food!!!! We ate until we were bloated and then left. It was quite an adventure!!

— Claire Smeltzer

Crazy English

May 1 is a national holiday in China, called Labor Day. Most organizations and businesses close for an entire week, so there were no classes for university students. However, one of our Chinese friends had agreed to serve as a volunteer for a week-long “Crazy English” program being held in Nanchong. The Crazy English pedagogy involves lots of repetition of one word or phrase, which is shouted as loudly and quickly as possible. Somehow, our friend persuaded us to participate in the program; fortunately, however, as the showcase foreigners, we were told that we could teach in any way we wanted to. The students, whose ages ranged from 8-17, were sorted into three different levels, A, B, and C, by age and ability. We had only agreed to serve as guest presenters for each of the three groups of students, once on Monday morning and once on Tuesday morning. We mostly tried to play games and read stories—some of which were acted out by Claire and me. Overall, it was definitely an interesting experience, and we ended up having fun.

— Meg Smeltzer

Hot Pot

Hot Pot
bubbling, spicy
chopsticks chasing food

unusual, authentic, original—slippery
huo guo

— Meg Smeltzer

Giant Pandas

Black and white spots
Pandas all together. They
eat and eat and eat bamboo — crunch.
green leaves, brown dirt. Nothing but eat
and sleep. **Walking**, walking, walking. Every-
body crowds around the baby. Red panda
on my lap, eating apples. Cameras
flash. Vendors selling every
kind of panda toy.



— Meg Smeltzer

Leshan and Emei

We are beginning to travel around China, with more to come in the next three weeks. Recently, we took a weekend trip to Leshan and Mt. Emei. Leshan is best known as home to the largest Buddha in the world, measuring 72 meters high. It is notable because it was built in 713 A.D. at the convergence of two rivers, and carved in sandstone on the side of a river bluff.

Mt. Emei, just a 30-minute bus ride away from Leshan, is a mountain that has religious significance in China. There are Buddhist mountains and Daoist mountains, but Emei is both. In general, though, apparently you have to go to a mountain or a temple to find religious significance. It is largely a secular culture.

We used a combination of modes of transportation to go up Mt. Emei. Part of the way up, we rode a bus. Part of the way up, we climbed. For the last portion, we rode a cable car to the summit. It's a little annoying that at many tourist attractions in China, there is a two tiered system admission pricing, with foreigners paying a higher price. Of course, we are also able to absorb a higher price more easily.

For all of us except Deirdre, Mt. Emei was the first time to see monkeys in a wild state. And when I say “wild”, I mean like the hand fed deer at Shenandoah National Park are wild, which means not caged, but not exactly reclusive either. Giving the monkeys fruit was preferable to having them just take it from you, we decided, after seeing one tear open a water bottle that it had stolen from a hiker's pocket, with its teeth.

— Sherwyn Smeltzer, June 2006

Langzhong

Students at North Sichuan Medical College had exams from June 26-July 6, with the final exam for my Freshman Listening class being held on June 29. This left us with ample free time during our last week in Nanchong to make a two-day trip to the nearby city of Langzhong. This small city, about 2.5 hours away from Nanchong by bus, is 2300 years old and has maintained a 1.5 square kilometer ancient town. We were told that Langzhong is famous for its sweet buns, its dried beef, and for a particular kind of brown rice vinegar; this last item is reputed to have numerous health benefits, including staving off cancer, and is consumed daily as a beverage by many Langzhong residents.

Our trip to Langzhong was made more eventful by inadvertently omitting all Chinese language aids (phrase books, etc.) while packing for the trip. While in Langzhong, we explored the streets of the ancient town and climbed a tower to look out over the city. We spent the night in a very old inn, and the next day decided to visit a sight called “The Number One Scholar’s Cave”. (We’re unsure whether “number one” refers to the cave or the scholar.) To get there, a taxi drove us out of the city and wended its way up the side of a mountain to a rather deserted-looking parking lot. From the parking lot, we walked further up the mountain along a secluded path until we came to the site entrance. We spent about an hour and a half exploring the area — Claire was entranced by frogs in the pond while Meg found a peaceful, shaded spot to read — and during that time we were joined by only one other group of three tourists.

After walking back to the deserted parking lot, we were faced with the question of how to get back down the mountain and ultimately to the long distance bus station; no taxi was waiting to take us. We decided that the only option was a long, hot walk down the road until we reached the city. Just a few minutes into our walk, however, a large, black car with tinted windows pulled up beside us. The car stopped and a window came down. A Chinese man and woman motioned from inside the car for us to join them. Somewhat hesitantly, we did so. Despite our limited communication skills, we managed to convey to them that we were trying to get to the long distance bus station. To our surprise and pleasure, this couple drove us the entire way to the bus station, and then refused to accept monetary compensation for their efforts — an example to us of the kindness of strangers!

— Deirdre Smeltzer, July 2006

Lijiang

We nearly abandoned our plans to visit Lijiang. We’d purchased tickets to travel from Kunming to Lijiang on a sleeper bus that was scheduled to leave Kunming at 8:00 p.m. on July 4 and arrive in Lijiang at 7:00 a.m. on July 5. Based on our experience with other long distance buses in China, it seemed reasonable to assume that an overnight bus would be equipped with bathroom facilities and would provide passengers with drinking water. Shortly before we boarded the bus, we learned that this was not the case — the bus provided neither food nor water nor bathroom facilities (although we were told that the bus would stop for a bathroom break every couple of hours). The physical arrangement of the bus added to our trepidation. Each passenger was assigned a small bed on which to travel and given a pillow and blanket. The beds were end-to-end in three rows along the length of the bus, and double stacked (making it impossible to sit fully upright). In addition, despite the “no smoking” instructions, some passengers smoked regularly while en route, creating a considerable fire hazard.

Happy just to have survived the bus ride, we were even more pleased to discover what a delightful city Lijiang is. Our China guidebook says, “Set in a picturesque valley with a stunning mountain backdrop, Lijiang’s Old Town, Dayan, is a labyrinth of cobbled alleys lined with wooden houses, cafes, and the workshops of traditional craftsmen. Home to the Naxi people, Dayan is one of the most pleasant urban scenes in China.” We agree! We thoroughly enjoyed wandering the streets, seeing the beautiful crafts, learning about the ancient Dongba script and religion of the Naxi people (a Chinese minority group), climbing a pavilion that stands at the highest point in Lijiang and overlooks the city, and trying some new foods. We also visited the Black Dragon Pool Park at the edge of town, which offered us the most beautiful sights of our entire China trip, with a lake in the center of the park and mountains surrounding.

— Deirdre Smeltzer, July 2006

Don’t miss the [photos](#) from Leshan, Mt. Emei, Langzhong, and Lijiang.