

Crotch-less Pants and Squatting Toilets

“Beautiful lady! Come over here and try a nice, tasty scorpion!” yelled the stand owner as he shoved a big, black skewered scorpion in my face. “No like? How about some sea horse? Good for health!” yelled another from across the way, beckoning me to come over to her stand. Dozens of stands, all bedecked with red lanterns, line the street of Wangfujing every night for the famous Wangfujing Night Market. Some sell tempting treats, such as steaming bowls of hot and sour noodles, while others sell the more exotic (and sometimes much less appetizing) delicacies. Locals sit on the sidewalk chowing down on fried dumplings and grilled lamb kebabs, while foreigners walk around and take in the unfamiliar sights and smells.

My first visit to Wangfujing was quite the experience. Having recently arrived in Beijing, I was unprepared for the aggressive vendors, who at times jumped out from behind their stands and literally pulled my friends and I toward their stalls. I was not accustomed to the hot, humid Beijing weather and felt like I was being eaten alive by mosquitoes. Most of all, I was not used to

the hoards of people everywhere. Seasoned laowai (the Chinese term for resident expatriates) and local Chinese walked briskly through the crowd, while I, the disoriented newcomer, shuffled timidly behind.

I arrived in Beijing in mid-July, a few weeks before the Olympic Games. This being my first time in Asia, I had no idea what to expect. I read tons of travel magazines and tour books and asked many friends (and friends of friends) who had been to Beijing what I should expect, but nothing could have prepared me for the chaos that is Beijing.

Thronges of people pour out of sub-

way cars, nearly trampling over the people trying to board. Taxis weave in and out of traffic, incessantly honking and pummeling through the herds of bicyclists and pedestrians in their path. Small toddlers wear pants with gaping holes in the bum, exposing themselves to the world and often

relieving themselves on the sidewalk in broad daylight. Squatting toilets scared the crap out of me, literally. And everywhere there are tons and tons of people, all speaking a language that seems completely indecipherable, despite my two years of intensive Mandarin language study.

Initially, I found the chaos to be quite daunting, and all I wanted to do was stay in my room and Skype with my family back home. But after a while, I began to venture outside of my room and gradually became accustomed to the nuances of life in Beijing. Crossing the street was no longer a near-death experience as I learned to navigate the oncoming traffic. I barely blink an eye at the children with crotch-less pants and know to stand my ground on the subway. Along the way, I met people who have welcomed me into their homes and discovered places that I could go to seek refuge from the hustle and bustle of Beijing.

Liulichang is one such place. Liulichang is a street renowned for its antique and calligraphy shops, with some establishments dating all the way back to the Ming Dynasty. Some Beijing natives dismiss it as a tourist trap, with shop owners charging up to ten times the normal price

for antiques of questionable quality. Tucked between the somewhat sketchy antique stores, however, is a small, unassuming tea shop owned by a woman named Zhai Xiao Fang. Upon seeing my friends and me, she immediately invited us in for a quick cup of tea.

Three hours later, we were still inside her shop, sampling different teas, talking about life and watching the sun set behind the buildings outside. We learned that the tea shop was a family-run business and met Zhai Xiao Fang's older sister and younger sister, who both work in the shop. We also met her 5-year old daughter, who constantly ran in and out of the shop, demanding a cup of oolong tea each time she returned.

Perhaps it was the soothing pots of tea, the ebb and flow of the conversation, or the genuine displays of kindness, but at that moment, I felt at home in Beijing. Even when Zhai Xiao Fang led me to the public restroom, which in addition to the dreaded squatting toilets had no doors, I felt completely at ease, effortlessly assuming a squatting position and laughing at the situation with my friends in the door-less stalls next to me. I left Liulichang that day with a smile, having found comfort in the most unlikely of places.

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