

A Real Taste of China

by Patricia Martin



I woke early having slept little. After a long trip it's always the same; it takes me a few days to acclimatize. Blinking away the sleep in my eyes, I shivered. Although it was summer we were in the mountains and the air was cool. A hot shower would be just the thing. Bleary-eyed, I tiptoed to the bathroom, undressed and turned the spigot. No hot water. Just my luck!

Mao and Joyce were still sleeping. Hardly daring to breathe, I quietly rummaged through my pack for my only change of clothes but my friends must have heard me because they stirred, groaned and sat up—first Joyce and then Mao.

“Good morning. I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No. It’s time to get up anyway.”

“I was going to have a shower but there’s no hot water.”

“Ah, the water is heated by the sun here. This afternoon there will be warm water,” Joyce told me.

Not much I could do about that. Besides, I was willing to put up with some inconveniences to experience this amazing place.

Breakfast was in the courtyard where bowls of foodstuffs sat on an otherwise bare cement table.

“What do you want?” Joyce asked.

“Give me a minute,” I said. “You go ahead.”

My friends discussed their options in Chinese and chose from dishes of unknown (to me) fresh greens and vegetables, hardboiled eggs, rice porridge, pickled vegetables, noodles and some unidentifiable meat. The cook took my friends’ choices into a shoebox-sized kitchen where he cooked them over a one-burner propane stove.

I decided on an egg, some porridge, and a few peanuts. The porridge was a simple watery soup of white rice. To my dismay, I discovered pieces of meat in it, and could only hope it wasn’t dog. Just the thought made my stomach somersault, but I knew if I were to survive in China I couldn’t be asking about the ingredients of everything put in front of me. I forced it down in spite of my gut’s gymnastics.

“So, what are we doing after breakfast?” I ventured when the lively conversation (none of which I could understand) stalled.

“My husband just found out it’s a special day. A very important Buddhist nun is having her birthday and there are visitors from all over the country here. We’re going to see if we can watch,” Mao said. “We need to hurry!”

Minutes later our van bumped over a gravel road en route to a nunnery. Our driver, a solid young man nearly as wide as he was tall, drove like a maniac. As he’d done yesterday, whenever he saw another vehicle approaching, for no apparent reason, he lay on the horn.

We pulled up near a walled compound of red bricks. The entrance, a stately semi-circular arch with double doors some 12 feet high was closed. A regular-sized doorway within one of the larger doors was open. Clusters of pilgrims and monks wearing conical straw hats and large cloth satchels slung over their shoulders lingered outside the compound.

At the doorway, Mao’s husband spoke to the gatekeeper. Could we enter? The rest of us were silent, respectful. I held my breath. She murmured something and gave a slight nod.

“We can go in,” Joyce breathed.

“But we must give some money to the nuns,” Mao added.

It was all I could do not to shout out my joy and do a little dance, but like my friends I moved as slowly as an ancient monk and didn’t make a sound; this was a holy place after all. I couldn’t believe our good fortune!

Our first stop took us to an immense hall where hundreds of circular horsehair cushions sat on the floor. An aisle ran up the center to a small curtained stage where a statue of Buddha was flanked by vases of bamboo, pyramids of fresh mangos and peaches and decorative plates of Chinese characters. A long table fronted the stage where dozens of decorated birthday cakes, small Buddhas, vases of lilies, carnations, lotus flowers and mixed bouquets paid homage. Several large drums on intricately carved wooden stands dotted the front of the room.

No sooner had we entered than the nuns began to arrive—masses of them. They wore dark brown robes, and unlike nuns in the West wore nothing on their heads. Silently, three abreast, they filed into the rows, each claiming a cushion until the entire place was packed. With a nod, a nun guided us to some vacant cushions in the back row and we joined the reverent throng. From my vantage point, I looked at the back of hundreds of shaved heads.

An elderly person with a deeply etched face, drooping eyebrows and hollow cheeks sat behind the table of offerings facing the crowd. It was impossible to tell if it was a man or woman.

“That’s the nun whose birthday it is,” Mao whispered.

The ceremony started. Although I didn't understand a word of it, I participated. I took my cues from the solemn nuns in front of me, folded my hands in prayer like them, stood when they stood, knelt when they knelt and bowed when they did. The chanting, drumming and bell-ringing spoke of something deep and mysterious; it held me spellbound.

At the end of the service, without a word spoken, an orderly procession of hairless women glided out of the room, and mind-shattering silence broke the spell. I'd witnessed something so alien to my experience that I felt dazed.

"The nuns are going to eat. Maybe we can have breakfast with them," Mao said. "My husband will ask."

After getting the go-ahead, we found some vacant seats in a vast dining hall where rows and rows of tables stretched from wall to wall. When everyone was seated, a procession of servers in gray robes arrived, one per row. Even the way breakfast was served was ritualized. First, they delivered two empty bowls, chopsticks and spoons to everyone. Then, they moved from person to person serving rice from large basins.

"They grow their own food," Mao whispered as the attendant filled our second bowl with cooked vegetables. "Buddhists are vegetarians."

When everyone had been served, the nuns bowed their heads as someone at the far end of the room—too far for me to see—led them in prayer. Although close to a thousand filled the room, no one spoke, and the only noises were those of utensils meeting bowls and eating sounds.

My stomach churned. Had I accidentally swallowed some contaminated tap water when I'd brushed my teeth or was it nerves? Regardless of the cause, I felt queasy. It was an honour to be in this room, in this extraordinary place so I tried to eat but only downed a few mouthfuls before realizing I'd lose my breakfast if I continued.

I leaned close to Mao and whispered in her ear. "I feel sick; I can't finish this. What should I do?"

Mao said, "I don't know. We are supposed to eat everything."

My mind grappled for ideas on how to get rid of the food in front of me. There were none; there simply was nowhere to stash it.

At the end of the meal, the servers appeared again. They started at the far end of each row and moved smoothly, silently from person to person collecting the dishes. My heart pounded. What would happen when my server saw food in my bowl?

The woman paused in front of me when she spotted the uneaten food, the flow of her steady movements now broken. She appeared startled, but to my immense relief, she took my bowls and carried on without a word.

It wasn't yet noon and I'd already witnessed the most awesome events. Praying and eating with multitudes of Buddhist nuns was something most Chinese people never got to experience, let alone a Western outsider.

Someone, something, was ensuring I got a taste of the Real China. Could it be the Buddha?