



OK, you've been everywhere and you're tired of take-out from the neighborhood Chinese

restaurant. You're ready for the real thing. You're thinking of booking a flight to China.

Get a few suggestions from a senior tourist who has been there several times. Beijing is the capital, and features Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City and other historic sites. While there, you can book tours of the city, as well as take the bus or train out about 50 miles to the Great Wall.

The wall is 15 centuries old, goes for a thousand miles and can be seen from orbiting satellites. It may be difficult for physically-challenged seniors to climb the required stairways and stroll the stony pathways. However, you may try it, because most tourists want photo or video proof of having visited the historic site. Hong Kong was a freewheeling, fun-loving British colony for a century until the Chinese government took over about 20 years ago. It has long been known for its great shopping, nightlife and fantastic restaurants. Fortunately, the up-tight Red Chinese bureaucrats have kept their heavy hands away from the city's tourism success, and Hong Kong is still a great place to visit.

Some savvy senior tourists believe Hong Kong is eclipsed today by Shanghai, the most totally contemporary city in China. If you'd combine New York City, Beverly Hills and Las Vegas, you'd have the ingredients for super-modern Shanghai. Soaring high-rise hotels, neon-lit streets, endless shopping at bargain prices and some of the best restaurants in the world.

However, any visit to China may start with a culture shock, and here are a few suggestions to make it a bit less of a problem. Despite enormous strides in individual freedoms, modernization and growing commerce over the past decade, the Chinese people still cling to many of their old lifestyles.

Along with a few teenagers with blue hair and draggy pants, you'll see many locals dressed in traditional drab Mao-era clothing. And because China's cities have attracted people from all over the country, they're really crowded. When you walk down the street of any big Chinese city, you may feel you're in a crushing line at the gate of an oversold football game.

Although the Chinese are some of the most polite people in the world, the senior tourist trying to get through their jammed big city streets may feel hemmed in by masses of elbows and knees. It may seem at times as if the entire billion-person population is there competing for space. So, whatever you do, just keep cool and patient, and you'll get to your destination.

As for sanitation, it has improved enormously since China has industrialized, but the senior Western tourist should always play it safe by staying away from public restrooms. Drink water only from sealed bottles. In hotels, don't drink from spigots, but use just bottled or boiled water.

Always, no matter how attractive it looks, be leery of food from street vendors. If it has been boiled in hot oil right in front of you for at least several minutes, you may give it a try and hope you'll be OK. Restaurants go through very strict inspections, but be careful to eat only thoroughly cooked meat, fish, poultry, veggies and desserts.

Bring your own adequate supply of everyday medications and hygiene items. Prescription drugs

are cheaper in China, but you can't be sure of quality or authenticity. In newer buildings of the big cities, you'll find Western style toilets, but not everywhere. Sometimes public restrooms offer little more than holes in the ground. A safe idea is to carry a basic supply of toilet tissue, wet wipes, paper towels and paper toilet seat covers when away from your hotel.

Before booking China, do your homework on necessary official paperwork. Check medical facilities, traditions, basic words you could use, weather, hotels and transportation. If prepared sensibly, your first visit to China will be easier, healthier and more enjoyable.