Luxurious Pampering

Living Room, Valley Wing Presidential Suite, Shangri La, Beijing, China

Need a quick getaway? **Richard Norris,** self-made millionaire, heads to China to catch up with its history and culture, while being thoroughly pampered in decadent luxury

When my meetings were unexpectedly postponed for three days, I decided that I had to commemorate this by taking a quick trip to China and experience its cultural sights in great style – something I'd always wanted to do, but never had the time. I particularly had a fondness for Shanghai and Beijing and thus decided to learn and visit the different elements of their history and culture.

As I only started planning the trip about a week in advance, I enlisted the help of two bespoke travel planners, Pure Entertainment Group (www.purentonline.com) and Quotient Travel Planner (www.travelplanner.com.sg) with an additional agenda – to pick up presents for the two daughters and the wife.

Superior Service

I arrived in Shanghai on a balmy weekday afternoon. As I stepped out of the luxurious Bombardier Challenger 300 that had taken me from Paris to the land of China, I was immediately greeted by a well-dressed man in a sharp suit. He was my customs concierge who walked me through the entire immigration process without me actually having to queue.

From there I was whisked to my hotel as my concierge proceeded to collect my luggage. With a hearty wave, I was sent on my way to meet my chauffeur who just happened to be driving a Brewster "Peninsula" green Rolls Royce Extended Wheelbase Phantom. This car, which can be rented for about US$400 per hour, was a dream to ride. Most welcomingly, I found a cool box that contained my tipple of choice, the Gosling's Black Seal.

It was a short ride to the Peninsula Shanghai hotel (www.peninsula.com), perhaps made shorter by the thrill of being driven in luxury and the heady high of the rum. As I reached the hotel, I was warmly welcomed after the usual check-in preliminaries. I was sent up to my suite, the Majestic (about US$10,000 per night), which I was told, housed certain Prime Ministers and international celebrities.

Architectural History

I met with my personal tour guide who escorted me around the Bund. He gave me a synopsis of Shanghai's history through the Bund's captivating architecture that encapsulates an awe-inspiring 17 different styles of architecture, such as classical, Gothic, renaissance,

Lobby, The Peninsula Shanghai, China

eclectic and modern, spanning more than 150 years since the first British company set up shop on the embankment. It was definitely inspiring to see the eclectic mix of buildings like banks, hotels, exclusive clubs, press organizations and international headquarters. We then headed to the French Concession along Xuhui and Luwan districts as well as other historically significant sights like the Old City, Pudong and other smaller districts.

My guide was a local Shanghainese gentleman with a wealth of information and the way he talked about the places made them come alive. We talked at some length until we reached a teahouse in Shanghai, a closely guarded secret of the locals, where I sampled their savory dumplings and sweets. I even got to take a stab at making my own dumplings and noodles, although my fumbling proved I probably shouldn't quit my day job.

Sublime Supper

By the time we returned to the hotel, I had decided that shopping would just have to take a backburner and requested that my concierge take care of procuring the gifts for the wife and the daughters.

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A Rolls Royce in front of the facade of The Peninsula, Shanghai, China

Majestic Living Room Suite - The Peninsula Shanghai, China

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Dinner was served shortly after, prepared by award-winning, Michelin-starred Chef Tang Chi Keung. The menu consisted of his signature dishes like pan-fried scallops that were stuffed with minced shrimps in black bean sauce – they were tender and perfectly complemented the sweetness and slight crunch of the shrimps. Regional favourites were also present, such as the incomparable Peking duck, with the precise crispness of the skin balancing the crunch of the onions and savoury sweetness of the sauce.

Some time later, suited personal shoppers appeared in my room carrying a selection of necklaces. I decided on a diamond necklace made of emerald-cut yellow diamonds totaling 135 carats from Graff Diamonds.

Suite Splendour

The next leg of my trip brought me to Beijing where once again, an airport VIP staffer met me at the gate, and sped up the process of immigration, baggage claim and customs. We made our way to our waiting transportation, a Bentley limousine, which provided a smooth ride through the streets of Beijing and turned into the Aman Summer Palace (www.amanresorts.com) – as recommended by Quotient Travel Planner, a bespoke travel planner based in Singapore.

The Aman at The Summer Palace is a wondrous and authentic experience in itself, where one can stay in the restored pavilions that used to house guests of the palace waiting for the Empress Dowager to receive them. It's a quick study into traditional Chinese architecture, which usually builds its buildings around an internal courtyard. I was ushered to my Courtyard Suite (US$1,300 per night) which was spacious, decorated in a Ming dynasty aesthetic (according to my concierge) with combined bedroom and living areas adorned with comfortable daybeds, reading chairs and writing desks. The design might be traditional, but the amenities, such as an island bathtub, were thoroughly modern.

Royal Visitation

Before I could test the tub, though, it was time to visit the Summer Palace via the Aman's private door. The Palace is dominated by the Longevity Hill and the Kunming Lake, with a total distance of 2.9km. With over 3,000 decorative halls, pavilions, towers, bridges and corridors, it is ranked among the best classical gardens of the world. My guide said that spring and summer were the best times to come. Used to the fast pace of the metropolises, this place was a welcome change as I took in all the locals who were content to live in the moment.

My guide and I proceeded to the Great Stage in the Garden of Harmonious Virtue, the site at which the Empress watched her theatrical performances. It is known for its superb acoustic effects throughout the three floors linked by air raises. The Empress apparently had a passion for opera and loved to sit on the wooden bed by the window at the western side of the hall for a better place to see the actors coming on stage to strike a pose. The experience was not nearly as pleasant though for her entourage of court officials, who had to kneel to watch the performances that usually lasted about six hours or more.

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The Aman at The Summer Palace, Cultural Room

the Aman at The Summer Palace is a wondrous and authentic experience in itself

The Aman at The Summer Palace, Suite Bedroom

As I paused to imagine the royalty at that time, I could sense my guide was getting unsettled. When I asked, he replied that the sunset at the Wenchang Tower was something I shouldn't miss. The skeptic in me reasoned that it was just another sunset, but I allowed myself to be dragged away and we ascended the stairs. I may have seen several sunsets in my lifetime, however, the sight of the sun sinking down behind the Western Hills and over Lake Kunming would likely be one of the more memorable ones ingrained in my memory for a long time to come.

The Royal Palace Tour

The next morning, we set out in our Mercedes S600. Quotient Travel Planner had arranged for my concierge and I to meet with a former Sotheby's expert. He was well-versed in the history of the palace and walked me through a tour known as the "Court Life of the Forbidden City", summarising nearly 500 years of political history in the palace.

The Forbidden City, once the imperial palace during the Ming and Qing dynasties, is now known as the Palace Museum and lies to the north of Tiananmen Square. It is the world's largest palace complex, with 9,999 buildings covering 74ha. The number nine is of great significance because it is a homonym to the word "long" in Mandarin. The Outer Court was for the emperor to exercise his supreme power, while the Inner Court was where he lived

with his royal family. The palace has been a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site since 1987 because of its illustrious history and the curiosities contained within it.

We then made our way to the Palace of Double Glory. The Chong Hua Gong is generally not open to the public and was originally built by the Emperor Yongzheng for his successor-to-be, Emperor Qianlong. This became the latter's private place for meeting friends and ministers, my guide told me, adding that the ministers would have to create poems during the tea banquet. The emperor was very fond of literature, and often combined his famous tea banquets that had 1,000 guests with verse recitation or lectures.

For lunch, I was led to a secret location that has served several dignitaries and superstars such as Jackie Chan. The food, intricately and carefully prepared, was a delight to the taste buds.

The evening was spent at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA) where I indulged in cocktails as well as a private tour of the gallery, which has been featured several times in notable global magazine titles. The dinner, specially prepared by the executive chef of the award-winning restaurant Made in China, highlighted the very best of northern Chinese cuisine. The food was not the only aesthetically pleasing sight. Complementing my dinner were performances of

The Forbidden City

The Great Wall of China

the Aman at The Summer Palace is a wondrous and authentic experience in itself

contemporary Chinese music and dance, a visually and aurally arresting treat.

The Deserted Great Wall

It was another early morning as I made my way out of the hotel. We were heading to the Jinshanling section of the Great Wall, which was, to my absolute delight, pristine and deserted by most tourists. I was introduced to an expert, William Lindsey, who directs the national monument's conservation programs.

The wall, he summarised, was actually built to protect the border of the Chinese Empire against intrusions by various nomadic groups. Since the fifth century BC to the 16th century, walls had been built, most famously the one that was built during 220-206BC by the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang. However, most of the existing walls were actually built during the Ming Dynasty. Together with all the branches, the Great Wall actually stretches for about 8,852km, a baffling distance that also includes trenches and natural defensive barriers like hills and rivers. The current area that we were standing on was actually 10.5km long with five passes, 67 towers and two beacon towers. The first part of the wall had some reconstructive work done, but as it approaches Simatai, William described, the wall deteriorates towards its natural state.

After we had strolled for a while, my stomach made its appeal. My concierge, always prepared and attuned to my needs, directed me towards a specific section. As I made my way towards it, I realised that they had in fact prepared a feast for me, featuring Western cuisine. It was only when I was taking a bite of my Filet Mignon that I realised that I indeed missed my Western food. No matter how delicious Oriental cuisine was, in my mind, it just couldn't quite compare to the smoky-charred flavour of a juicy steak.

When I was done with lunch, my guides led me to another area, where they promised me yet another spectacular performance. The Beijing Jing Xi Shaolin Performance Group displayed astonishing agility and acrobatics, moving in perfect harmony in rigorously practiced choreography, brandishing different weapons. Apparently, they were one of the best, having performed in the Olympic Games and the Shanghai EXPO opening ceremony, a fitting close to the end of my trip.

Just before I headed home, my concierge personally presented me with a garment bag. I unzipped the bag to find the finest silk *qi paos,* in various hues and sizes. There were altogether six, two for each lady and tailor-made to fit them like a glove. He had apparently taken the measurements that I had given him and passed it to the top Beijing tailor from Cao Shenlin, who had made minor adjustments to be sure that they would fit.

Although it had been a short trip, my concierge's dedicated attention as well as all the little perks I experienced were more than enough to make it truly memorable. Not only was I very pleased with all the memoirs I had acquired, mainly little presents for the ladies back home, as well as the fine bespoke experiences arranged for me, perhaps more interestingly, the history lessons I had learned as well as the cultural performances I had witnessed would stay with me for years to come. **INSPIRE**

**This three-day trip was modified from longer itineraries from Pure Entertainment Group and Quotient Travel Planner, which originally cost US$150,000 and US$450,000 respectively.*

Bei Hai Park, Beijing, China