



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

IT'S not every New year's Eve that you get to spend in a Reggae Bar beside a frozen lake in the middle of Beijing knowing that in a few hours later you are going to be trekking on the Great Wall of China, but that's what I got up to this year.

So, why and how did this happen?

The "Why" was very easy, I was there to see my son Patrick who is teaching English and Current Affairs at Renmin College, a feeder school to China's most prestigious University.

The "How" was nearly as easy too, thanks to a variety of transport that would have made even Michael Palin pale.

I travelled on everything except a rickshaw. I started from downtown Limavady in the early hours via taxi to Derry, bus to Dublin, a flight to Istanbul, and then another flight to Beijing, then a train journey, then a subway to complete the journey. So, what was I going to do there? And what has it to do with Sport?!

All will be revealed but before that there are 10 things you may wish to know about Beijing in China:

1. Smog. If Limavady's level of smog is zero (as we have no industry worth talking about) and if the recorded level in the Western

world is meant to be under 50, Beijing on a bad day can reach 500. That means burning eyes, coughing, and you feel as if you have just smoked 20 Woodbine one after the other. The day I arrived it was a mere 70.

2. The currency. Technically it is the Yuan (as pronounced by Mrs. Doyle in Father Ted, "Go wan, Go wan, etc."). There are roughly 10 to the pound, so it was easy to calculate prices.

3. Cost of living. A meal out in a restaurant (no, it's not a Chinese restaurant, as every restaurant in Beijing is Chinese!) with fantastic grub and beer is about £5.00 or £6.00 a head. My apartment (comfortable, modern, kitchen, TV etc.) was £33.00 per day. If you want to buy western goods however that price will obviously increase.

4. Underground. The locals will tell you that the best benefit of the Olympics was the development of the existing subway and the building of new

BREAKING CHINA!

lines. It's all ridiculously cheap. Two days before I arrived the price for a ticket increased for the first time in 10 years but the average journey was still only 30 pence.

5. The economy. One survey a few weeks ago put the Chinese economy as bigger than that of USA if you take the PPP (Power of Purchasing Parity) into account. Even if you don't, it's only a matter of time before 1.2 billion people generate more income than 316 million Americans.

6. Politics. There are three T's you don't talk about in China with the locals. Taiwan, Tibet and Tiananmen Square, you have been warned! The Chinese Government has given economic liberalism to the population without any political freedom. If the economy continues to grow at 7 to 8% per annum they might even keep the lid on any movement towards democracy, but if the economy goes belly up, all bets are off.....

7. Spitting and smoking. These two antisocial habits are still prevalent? Why? Because cigarettes are cheap - and spitting is even cheaper!

8. Language - Mandarin of course. Not many people speak English there. Why? Because they don't have to. Why bother learning English when there are more people in the world speaking Mandarin! Patrick's grasp of mandarin even in 5 months was very impressive. Maybe we should cancel our Irish and French classes here, because when the tanks roll up Market Street in 25 years' time waving a big red and yellow flag, it might be an advantage to be able to communicate with the Tank Commander.....

9. Tipping. You don't do it. If you leave some money on the table of a restaurant the waiter chases you down the street to give it back to you. Tipping is practically an insult!

10. Security. One of Patrick's friends lost their phone and wallet inside an hour and a half they had been tracked down and both items had been handed into the Police. The Government of China likes to know where you are, and who you are with all the

time..... "1984" was only in its infancy when the Chinese Government learned how to track all of the people all of the time.....

MAO AND ME!

The change of pace in modern day China is frightening. The past was an aeon ago, but the future is just tomorrow. Most of the change has been driven by the untrammelled relentless pursuit of a capitalist agenda where every square centimetre seems to be religiously devoted to the pursuit of mammon and yet when you look at every single bank note of the Chinese currency, Chairman Mao's face is beaming proudly out over his renmin i.e. people. But when you turn the note over there is not a single trace of Maolet. That's exactly what the Chinese authorities have done. They have simply turned over a new leaf. Chairman Mao would be turning in his grave - if he had one. Instead of that, Patrick and I reverentially filed our way passed his pickled preserved body in his very own mausoleum. The other mourners were none Beijingers from the sticks who perhaps overlooked the fact that their dear leader was responsible directly or indirectly for the deaths of 38 million of their fellow comrades. The mausoleum is on the edge of Tiananmen Square where the Government ruthlessly put down a fledgling flowering of the delicate plant of democracy with thousands killed by bullets and crushed by tanks. Many of Patrick's students aged 11-17 know nothing of their state's act of genocide on its own people. Tiananmen is the modern heart and soul of Beijing but only a short walk away is the Forbidden City, named because at one time only members of the Imperial Court were allowed inside. It is one of the largest and greatest Palace complexes ever built. It was also bitterly cold so Patrick and I didn't linger.

OFF TO THE WALL!

The next day however was to be even colder. We were in Yan Quing, a tiny village 60 kilometre

west of Beijing. We travelled there on a 90 minute train ride which cost us the mighty sum of 50p! This was something I was really looking forward to - we were going hiking on the Great Wall of China, the stuff of legend and China's premier tourist attraction. A few weeks President Michael D. Higgins stood on the wall at Bodoligh. It is so accessible by road and rail that it is perpetually busy. Patrick however had sussed out the next - and last - stop on the railway journey, Yan Quing, where we were picked up by taxi and taken to a super wee hostel called "Great Wall Fresh" where we had booked to spend two nights. The last time Patrick was there, there was 25 or so travellers or so from all over the world. This time there were just the two of us along with a couple from Spain and France. They were also teachers, as every other Westerner in Beijing appears to be.

Our bed could accommodate about 6 people and it had a fire underneath to heat the bricks so that the heat percolated through to us during the night. As it was way below zero this was very welcome! We went out for an exploratory two hour hike in the afternoon of New Year's Day. The previous night we had brought in the New Year (four p.m. your time) in the loft of a Reggae Bar in the Hou-Hai District where the Singapore gin slings cost only £2.00 and where we were encouraged to write on the walls with a marker pen supplied by the bar staff. I added "Tibet Rules, ok" to add to other thousands of other messages. It was surreal but also wonderful to be surrounded by Patrick and his mates, all of whom were having their very own Marco Polo style adventure. I so admire their bravery, their free spirit and their joy of exploration as they learn to live in a completely alien environment.

The one thing that would have been extremely alien but was actually very familiar was the Beijing subway system. Six months previously I was grappling with the underground in Moscow

where there was not a single word of English and where the stations weren't even announced when you got there. By

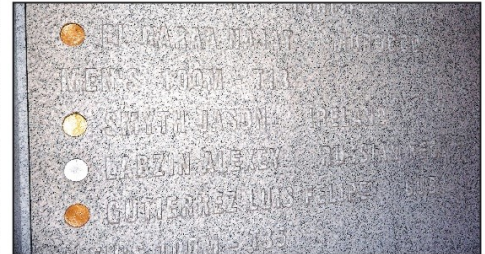
contrast the Beijing version had every station in English and there was also a helpful colourful moving display to show you where the train was and when it would arrive next. Thirty years ago, the Beijing Transport System couldn't boil an egg. Three decades later, it shuttles around this vast metropolis (the size of Belgium) an average of 10 million travellers daily efficiently, quickly and cheaply. Most journeys cost between 30

and 40p. The wheels of commerce are dependent on a great transport system which is why it amazes me that we still don't even have a dual carriageway between Northern Ireland's two cities.....

Join me next week to find out what happens when the Fool on the Hill has a Fall on the Wall and unlike Humpty Dumpty, he couldn't be put back together again and ended up in a Beijing hospital...



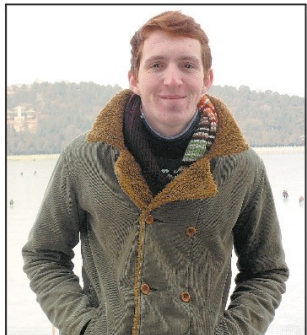
Triangle Triathlon Club on tour! Peter with the TTC flag on the Great Wall of China last week. NCL03-511s



Eglinton sprinter Jason Smyth's name inscribed on the wall opposite the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing. NCL03-554s



Chinese athlete's fuel! NCL03-558s



Patrick Jack at the frozen lake of the Summer Palace in Beijing. NCL03-716s