

A Week in Hong Kong and Guilin: Hong Kong and Guangxi, 2 through 7 June 2008, rain

Pictures: <http://picasaweb.google.com/bcarasik/HongKongAndGuilinJune2Through7>

Mary joined me for a week of “real vacation” after my learning and teaching odyssey. She had a day to reconnoiter before I arrived from Wuhan Sunday evening. This was our chance to enjoy scenic China, but it is also the beginning of the rainy season. We were at the Ramada in Sheung Wan, a crowded, non-touristy neighborhood just west of the ferry terminals on Hong Kong Island. Our hotel was clean, functional and not expensive, but the petty stinginess (only 2 cans of beer in the minibar, no A/C in the elevator lobby, turd-brown, cramped décor, pompous menus, and a \$3.50 per hour charge for a flickering wireless connection) showed the dark side of British influence. We had a delicious if nearly ambience-free dinner just down the block, then walked up Hollywood Road to the entertainment area centered on Elgin and D’Aquila streets. But for the dazzling neon signs spanning the streets, this could have been Bartown, Anywhere: a tequila bar named “Agave”, a tapas place named “Bodega”, a Thai restaurant named “Phu Ket” .. all that was lacking was a Greek restaurant named “The Parthenon”. Mary’s research indicated a good reggae dj at “Post 97” (get it?), so in we went for a fifteen-dollar (US, that is) pair of Heinekens. I didn’t especially notice same-sex couples dancing, and it wasn’t until days later we re-read the Time Out guide and saw that the place was listed as LGBT.

Monday June 2nd was rainy, on and off, so extensive hiking would have been a bad idea. We had a slow morning paying and sipping weak tea. In the afternoon we went up the Peak Tram to enjoy the view from Victoria Peak. Visibility wasn’t ideal, but the worst view of Hong Kong harbor is way better than the best view of most places. After we came back down the hill we browsed some art galleries, had dinner, and got back to the hotel early rather than risk even more rain. We made a reservation for two more nights at the end of our stay so we could leave some luggage there and travel lighter on our trip to the mainland. About an hour after we went to sleep, Mary got a call from the front desk. With respect to our request for a double bed, could we please offer proof that we’re married? Mary began to explain to the clerk that we use different last name, before coming to her senses and telling them not to dare call so late at night.

The next morning, Mary insisted on speaking to the manager, who resisted briefly, then apologized and upgraded us to a suite for our two final nights. The ghost of Victorian regulation having been laid, we set out on a lengthy steamy walk around Western, and took in the art museum at the University of Hong Kong. Then it was time to start our journey to Guilin, a tourist center in Guangxi Province. We took a ferry across the harbor and entered mainland China at Shekou just as the rain resumed in earnest. Then we took an hour-long cab ride to Shenzhen airport, all so we could have a US \$200 round trip instead of the \$550 or so the flight would cost from Hong Kong. Guilin was well worth it. Our cab driver helped us book a river cruise for the next day, with her brother on the phone translating the parts of the negotiation that I couldn’t handle in Chinese.

June 4th dawned warm and hazy. We had a beautiful day on the Li River, enjoying views of the incredible karst formations. We landed at Yangshuo, which I feared would be backpacker hell like Sorrento, but turned out to be surprisingly mellow, full of largely Chinese tourists. We escaped the summer heat by promptly hopping on an excursion bus to the Silver Cave. The next day we rented bikes and followed some dirt roads among the rice fields and karst mountains, before hopping on a bus back to Guilin.

On the 6th, the Olympic torch was in town. We joined the happy throng on the main street and waited about two hours for a view of ... not very much, commercial vehicles mostly. Waiting around in our \$1 "I heart China" T-shirts and enjoying curious questions from teens trying their classroom English was well worth it. We then had some \$4 coffees, and walked around the local palace, which has its own karst peak right behind the examination cells. Around sunset, we headed back out to the airport with our original cab driver and flew back to Shenzhen.

Then the fun began. We arrived about midnight in a heavy rainstorm and got a cab to the 24-hour border crossing. As expected the ride took about an hour, but we didn't expect the sheets of water on the freeway or the traffic frenzy at the drop-off point. No frozen Vermont roadside, this



Figure 1: Rainfall map from South China Morning Post, June 8, 2008

border post consisted of two massive 24-hour bus stations with a set of passport controls. The formalities went smoothly enough and soon we were on a shuttle bus to Wan Chai, two neighborhoods over from our destination. By 2:30 am we were safe in a shit-brown carpetless suite, flipping through the Australian, BBC, Korean, Hong Kong, and other news channels. I can imagine media-starved Mainlanders might enjoy coming to Hong Kong just to channel surf. And with the torrential monsoon, there was little else to do. We slept until noon, not realizing that the seasonal rain we were listening to was in fact a 50-year record. Our neighborhood (see map) was in fact an epicenter and received a full foot of rain between 8:30 and 9:30 in the morning.

<http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/news/news-china-weather.html>

We eventually went out as the rain eased, had some lunch and went to, of all things, an Eisenstein film about revolutionary Mexico at the HK Film Archive. Next morning we checked in for our homeward flight at the ultra-efficient downtown air terminal. Due to

yesterday's havoc, they wanted our seats to San Francisco and offered us an upgrade in exchange for going home via L.A. Fair enough, we were not in that much of a hurry. After a smooth and featureless couple of hours in the smooth and featureless new Hong Kong airport, we departed for LAX on time. I raised a glass in salute to [Kai Tak](#), the dangerously cramped old downtown airport. After lunch we surrendered consciousness to a chemical maelstrom of wine and Melatonin and sank into our business-class seats for nine solid hours of sleep before being roused by the smell of coffee and a view of Point Reyes.

