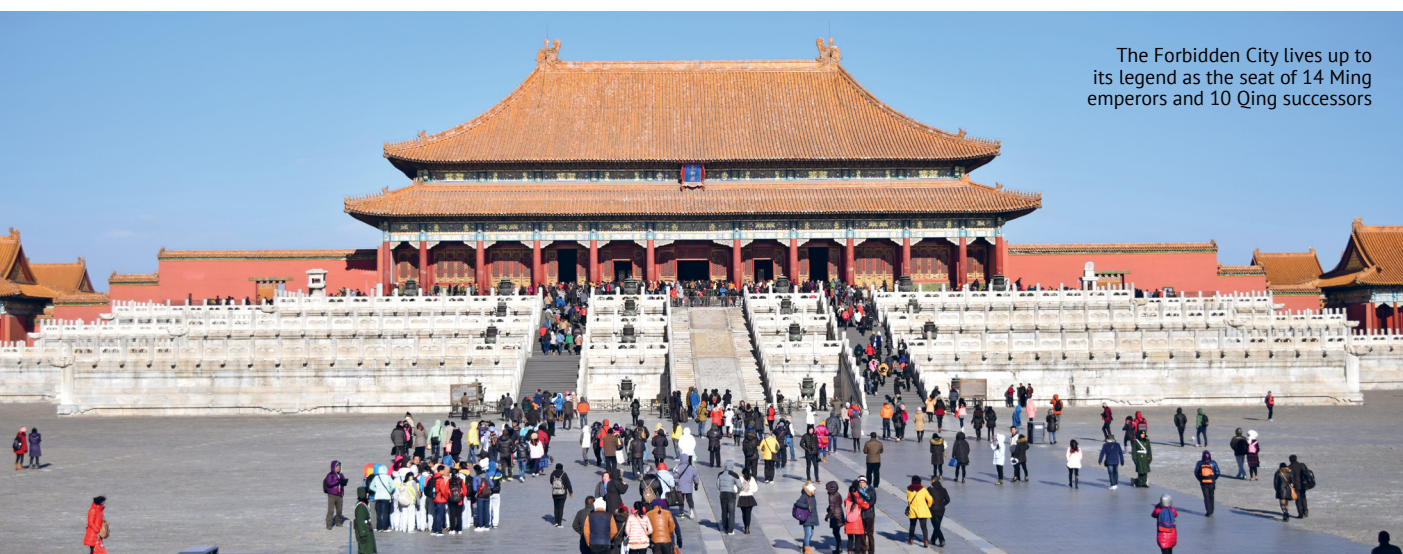


JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD

FROM THE GREAT WALL TO TIANANMEN SQUARE, MODERN-DAY BEIJING OFFERS AN EXPERIENCE YOU WON'T FIND ANYWHERE ELSE

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The Forbidden City lives up to its legend as the seat of 14 Ming emperors and 10 Qing successors

A sojourn to Beijing is like a chance encounter with a long-lost flame, stirring up similar sentiments as the quiet joy of reconnection, heady thrill of renewed discovery and gentle nostalgia for days gone by emerge and intermingle with the sun-drenched sights and sounds of this northern capital.

Strolling down its streets and savouring the shaded spaces of its stately squares and *siheyuan* (courtyard residences), fleeting glimpses of its heritage are readily apparent, ancient beyond measure and echoing with the grandeur of countless Imperial dynasties past. This is the Beijing of the emperors and their eunuchs, the Mongols and the Mings stretching back millennia into antiquity.

It coexists side-by-side with the immense industrial, financial and cultural behemoth that the city has become today; caught between the political purges of the post-revolution republic and the boundless optimism and urbanisation leading up to its world stage spotlight hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics.

The contrast between the age-old and the hopeful-new is reflected in the wizened features of a street peddler and

her granddaughter, cherubic cheeks crimson from the chill, as the pair ply passersby with quaint curios on the wind-swept plain of Tiananmen Square.

It is seen in the weathered stones and love-lock wreaths of the Great Wall, as generations of lovers surmount its timeworn steps to profess undying affection in bright, burnished brass, beset on all sides by perilous plunges amid the rugged vistas of what must surely be the crown of the world.

It is seen in the halogen halo of a modern convenience store in the traditional hutong district of the city, a labyrinth of narrow lanes and alleys formed by the convergence of *siheyuan*, courtyard residences designed and built around the social castes of the Zhou Empire 2,000 years ago.

An honour guard stands to attention in the windswept plain of Tiananmen Square



The Beijing National Aquatics Centre, nicknamed the Water Cube, glows a brilliant blue



Love locks are a common sight along the Great Wall's flanks, done in bright burnished brass





The view from atop the Great Wall is worth the climb, though wind chill can be a concern



The Forbidden City counts a number of shrines among its attractions

The star and subject of a thousand dramas, documentaries and dissertations, Beijing can feel familiar even to those who have never travelled to its teeming tenements and temples, evoking an eerie sense of *déjà vu* to first-time tourists as they recognise landmarks and landscapes that they've never laid eyes on.

But no amount of *déjà vu* can prepare venturing visitors for the sheer weight of history that pervades every part of present day Beijing, whose name has changed through the centuries to reflect its evolving identity, as the crucible of social forces reshaped it by turns into Yanjing, the capital of the state of Yan, and Nanjing, the southern capital of the Khitan Liao Dynasty, along with Jicheng, Fanyang, Zhongdu, and many more besides Peking.

The world wanderer can walk in wonder through its soaring structures, a seamless synthesis of Sino-Slav styles, Imperial architecture and contemporary lines, as they discover the city hidden behind the fanciful fictions of travel boutiques and tour guides. In some districts, Beijing can pass as a patchwork pastiche of the quintessential Russian burg, with dour, sprawling edifices frowning down upon grey pavement.



The manicured walkways of the Imperial Garden are an oasis of tranquillity

But just a stone's throw away, the splendour of the Forbidden City lives up to its legend, bedecked in the precious woods of the jungles of southwest China, floored with the "golden" bricks of the kilns of Lumu and strewn throughout with monolithic slabs of marble labouriously transported over paths of ice from neighbouring quarries.

Leisurely afternoons can be spent exploring the mazes and mysteries of the mammoth monument, from the majestic Gate of Divine Might and Hall of Military Eminence to the manicured footpaths of the Imperial Garden and Palace of Tranquil Longevity. The seat of 14 Ming emperors and 10 Qing successors, the wings of the Dragon Throne stretch from years of yore to cast their shadows on crowds of onlookers today.

Like everything else in the multitudinous metropolis, its populace is a gruff blend of the then and the now, a marvellous *mélange* of old-guard traditionalists steeped in the rural customs of their forefathers and a new generation of city-bred cosmopolitans, comfortable in Chanel and colourful coffee chains.

While a night in Bangkok might make a hard man humble, Beijing is more likely to bring riches from rags, with no less than 192,000 millionaires calling it home. A veritable



Peking Duck is the prized *piece de resistance* of Beijing cuisine

influx of *nouveau riche*, the skyrocketing affluence of its denizens has left an indelible mark on the character of the city, with Lamborghinis, Ferraris and Bentleys a common sight on its expansive expressways.

Rampant industrial development and economic success in the region have also taken their toll on the town, covering it in choking clouds of coal-based smog originating from nearby areas like Shangdon Province and Tianjin Municipality. On bad days, residents don filtering face masks *en masse*, a grim vision of Orwellian proportions.

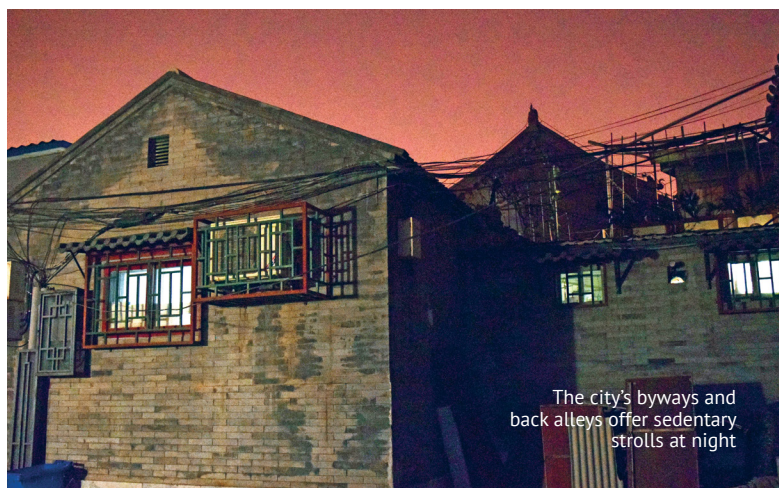
But the North China Plain has bred a people as hardy as the mountains that gird them from the desolation of the Gobi Desert, and to them the particulate pollution is just a matter of course. Perhaps they are fortified by the particular properties of Beijing cuisine, said to have its roots in the Emperor's kitchen as cooks from across the country honed their culinary crafts to please Imperial palates.

Peking Duck is the *piece de resistance*, glazed with maltose syrup and carefully roasted to produce a delicacy renowned among gourmands the world over. Its glistening, crackling skin is golden brown, with a layer of fatty richness to complement the moist meat underneath, each mouthful yielding textures and tastes that could tempt the most devout weight-watcher into wild abandon.

The duck is carved by the tableside into 108 slices and served with pancakes, scallions, cucumber sticks, sugar and sweet bean sauce. Diners are invited to wrap the fragrant morsels into bite-sized rolls, adding toppings according to taste and eating the whole by hand.

This divine dish is reason enough to fall in love with Beijing, but its sumptuous tea houses and streetside stalls offer a thousand more besides. Southern specialties and ingredients are increasingly popular, with the tongue-numbing Szechuan peppercorn a frequent favourite to keep warm on winter nights.

All told, it's easy to see why early travellers came to call Beijing the Celestial City and the Centre of the World. Prospective pilgrims to this pinnacle of the East are strongly advised to dress for the season, however, as its continental climate is equally prone to scorching summers, tropical monsoons and subfreezing frosts, with the occasional sandstorm thrown in for good measure. ■



The city's byways and back alleys offer sedentary strolls at night