

Beijing, China

This feature was originally distributed through Travel Arts Syndicate and appeared in 2005 under various titles in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and elsewhere.

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Beijing street vendors set up shop early. (Photo by Claire Walter)

Morning Becomes Beijing

By Claire Walter

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Early in the morning, as the eastern sky shows the impending day's first light, people begin to arrive at Tian'amen Square. They gather quietly on the northeast corner of this imposing public space of nearly 100 acres, staring across the pavement at the Forbidden City and the monumental portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong. They all face a tall flagpole whose white shaft begins to emerge, visually, from the dark. They are waiting for something.

Meanwhile, squadrons of shadowy blue-clad figures wielding straw brooms sweep every trace of the prior day's litter from the sidewalks, the streets, the square itself. In a country where millions toil increasingly mechanized factories, these street sweepers perform manual work. They scoop up every cigarette butt, candy wrapper, advertising palm card, toothpick, lottery ticket and other detritus of urban life. And still, the crowd waits.

Jammed buses, taxis, private cars that symbolize the consumerism displayed by the growing executive and middle classes, and fleets of classic bicycles in their own orderly lane whiz by. Although the workday officially begins at 9 a.m., Beijing is now so large that millions of people start early to beat the traffic – therefore, as in all other cities, stretching the rush hour. And still, the crowd waits.

As more people move toward the square along commodious sidewalks or up from the subway, earlybird hawkers approach foreign and domestic tourists. They hold out beads, small Mao portraits, children's plastic toys, the flag of the People's Republic of China with five of yellow stars against a red background, postcards and, when they think they can get away with it, unofficial knock-offs of 2008 Olympic medals. And still, the crowd waits.

As the sky blooms with morning colors – pink, orange, yellow or ivory – officers suddenly halt traffic on Chang'an Avenue, the eight-lane thoroughfare between Tian'anmen Square and the Forbidden City. No one honks, because even the most rushed commuter knows that an important ritual is about to take place.

A platoon of soldiers marches from its Forbidden City garrison, down a cobblestone road, across Chang'an Avenue – and straight toward the flagpole. China's recorded national anthem, amplified loudly enough to be heard blocks away, begins as the soldiers hoist the flag in a measured manner. It reaches the top of the pole just as the anthem finishes and the sun breaks over the horizon. The soldiers form up again, and traffic on Chang'an Avenue is again halted as they march back to the Forbidden City.

Because this short ceremony takes place every morning of the year, start time must be adjusted daily, but it always is precise. While the anthem does project, spectators watch with restrained patriotism. On special holidays, an ancient soldier or two might join the crowd, usually accompanied by a solicitous young soldier. These old men, still proud in their Mao jackets, could well be veterans of the Long March that culminated in the Communist Party victory, and though most Chinese no longer revere failed policies, Chairman Mao and his early acolytes are still honored for their revolutionary zeal and positive reforms.

When the ceremony ends, the sun begins warming the plaza and the traffic picks up still more. The crowd disperses, and more hawkers and, young and old kite flyers appear. They unfurl the strings and launch fantastic multi-colored and interestingly shaped designs. Box kites, dragon kites, kites representing fierce raptors and even kites designed like even fiercer fighter planes soar overhead. Some are demonstration models, flown by hawkers who hope to sell them to passersby, while others are there only for pleasure. As the sun continues to climb, the wind dies down, the kite flyers and kite sellers leave, and legions of sightseers fill Tian'anmen Square.

A Morning Culture

In addition to patriotism, the flag-raising ceremony proves that the Chinese are morning people – and the a.m. kite flyers confirm it. Everywhere in the city, people start early – before the heat becomes too oppressive, before the air gets too foul and most important, before they have other things to do. Since most Western tourists visit in groups on later schedules, try to escape from your hotel for a couple of hours before (or instead of) breakfast for a glimpse of the real Beijing. It can be the most rewarding part of the day.

Although the Beijing standard of living has risen in recent years, and many people now live in relatively modern buildings with ample electricity and plumbing, much of Chinese life still takes place in public. People shop, exercise and socialize outdoors in a very Asian, very communal way.

You'll see groups of men taking caged birds for a morning walk in a leafy park or playing mahjong on street corners, and both men and women exercising in small parks, open spaces, along waterside quays, on playgrounds, under bridges and in plazas in front of high-rise office towers, people are out early. It is difficult to envision China without tape players. Older folk gather for morning *t'ai chi* or *chi gong*. Someone clicks on the music, and someone leads the deliberate, slow-moving exercises that help people maintain their balance, mobility, flexibility and strength well into their later years.

Elsewhere, groups of workers, often in like-colored T-shirts, gather for outdoor aerobics classes. American fitness buffs would shudder at the thought of doing even low-impact routines on the pavement. Outdoor ballroom dancing is another enchanting morning routine. Twosomes waltz and foxtrot to recorded music. In other parks and playgrounds, adults drop by to work out on monkey bars, parallel bars, rings, striders and other outdoor fitness apparatus. No one is self-conscious – and everyone who does so is better off for it.

Beijing and other Chinese cities also abound with morning commerce. Neighborhood shops open, and street vendors materialize early selling food to eat on the spot or on the run – or to purchase and prepare at home later. Some sell off the backs of old bicycles or motor scooters. Others simply balance wares on a crate or set up shop from plastic tubs set directly on the ground.

Even in fancy districts with high-rise hotels, upscale apartments and international enterprises, an old-style market might be closeby. Ask your hotel for directions and a marked-up map to the nearest one, or have the hotel write the directions in Chinese and grab a cab.

While Shanghai, a more southerly city, abounds with markets that start at 5:30 a.m. and break down by 8:00 a.m., Beijing's morning markets tend to run an hour or two later. One of the largest year-round markets occupies a side street near the Great Wall Sheraton Hotel in the Chaoyang District. Clothing, housewares, toys and appliances are sold from permanent shops, while daily food vendors add to the colorful mix.

If you're in Beijing on a weekend, explore the Sunday Panjiayuan market, also in the Chaoyang District. It features hundreds of open-air stalls selling authentic jade, bronze, wood and other collectibles, plus equally authentic knock-offs and junk. The knowledgeable arrive at dawn, prowl around and leave early to clean up before embarking on the rest of the day.

With most parents working, schools start early too – at 7:30. Get going early enough, as parents walk shiny-faced youngsters to neighborhood schools. With luck,

you'll even be invited to visit – and the teacher might ask the children to sing a song for you.

Morning is also a splendid time to visit a *hutong*, a traditional but rapidly disappearing style of residential neighborhood comprised of low-rise homes, a web of narrow lanes and a timeless culture where people know each other and look out for each other. Some tour operators offer mid-day pedicab *hutong* tours, but how much more satisfying to walk around at leisure and drink in the ambience instead of just being pedaled by.

Whatever you do in Beijing, try not to sleep in. If you do, you'll miss imposing ceremonies and small daily routines alike. Far better to get out early and explore – and being to understand the culture of this compelling city.

IF YOU GO

China information is available from the China National Tourist Office, 600 West Broadway, Suite 320, Glendale, CA 91204; 818-545-7507. Also, 350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 6413, New York, NY 10118. 888-760-8218. Website for both offices is www.cnto.org. You can download the mandatory visa application form from this site.

It is certainly possible for adventurous travelers to travel independently to Beijing or to book a Beijing-only package, but the vast majority of North American travelers go on a group tour of several China destinations for convenience and value. A tour escort normally accompanies the group throughout, with local guides hired in each city. Experienced tour operators can also arrange custom itineraries with as much or as little independence as clients want.

Even on the most organized group program, visitors can be decisive about wanting some time to explore on their own – and the truth is that doing so early in morning is logistically easy. Just be back by the time the motorcoach departs if you want to join the day's scheduled outing.

If you do not feel comfortable doing this independently, ask your own travel provider to organize a custom morning excursion, or contact a local tour operator (below) to book a guide for a custom morning adventure.

Tour Operators

Beijing is on virtually every tour operator's itinerary, whose programs include four- and five-star hotels, all meals, inland transportation and guides. Among the tour operators from North America:

Asia Transpacific Journeys, 2995 Center Green Court, Boulder, CO 80301; 800-642-2742 or 303-443-6789; www.asiatranspacific.com.

China Classic Tours, 2472 Broadway, Suite 265, New York, NY 10025; 212-967-4589;; www.chinaclassictours.com.

Pacific Bestours, 250 Moonachie Road, Moonachie, NJ 07074;: 888-666-6202 or 201-296-0090; www.bestours.com.

Pacific Holidays, 12 West 32nd Street, New York, NY 10001; 212-629-3888.

SITA Tours, SITA Building, 16250 Ventura Blvd., Suite 300, Encino, CA 91436;
800-421-5643 or 818-990-9530; www.sitatours.com.

Imperial Tours, 3172 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, CA 94115; 888-888-1970;
www.imperialtours.net.

Local Tour Operators

Beijing Trip/China Tours, Suite 5-B, Kang De Mansion, 447 Chang An Nan Lu
Xi'an 710061, PRC. Phone 86-29-8523-6688; www.beijingtrip.com.

China International Travel Service, CITS Building, 103 Fuxingmennei Avenue, Beijing
100800, PRC. Phone 86-6601-4141; www.cits.net.

Tour Beijing, Jia 23, Fuxinlu, Beijing 100036, PRC. Phone: 86-10-87757080, 87757081;
Fax: 0086-10-87757110; www.tour-beijing.com.

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