



# Cycle Touring China – Part Two

Exploring the South  
Coast, Xiamen to  
Nanning

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SHIMANO  
**DEORE**





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2 795 Kilometres– 60 Days





***Thank You***

***As always when cycle touring, I was amazed and humbled by the kind generosity of strangers and the random acts of kindness bestowed on me by the people of China.***

***I'm also immensely grateful to my sister Amanda who, through the years, selflessly, kept my journal entries and photos in a well-organised manner. Without her, there would have been no record of my travels.***

***As always, I'm much indebted to my friend Val Abrahamse, who kept my personal and financial matters at home in good order while I travelled the globe. It would have been quite impossible to have achieved this without her conscientious efforts.***



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# CHINA (2)

## **Keelung, Taiwan – Xiamen, Fujian, China - By Boat**

The Cosco Star was far more substantial than envisaged and the interior quite luxurious. Cabins revealed six bunk beds to a cabin, but I was the sole person in my compartment. Unfortunately, the ship rolled wildly, and I thought it best to stay put.

Reaching Xiamen, China was around 9h30 the following morning and navigating immigration was uncomplicated. I changed my last Taiwanese money, drew a few more Chinese yuan and was excited to see what the area held.

Xiamen came as a shock, the town was massive, featuring a sea of high-rise buildings but it was scarcely a dot on the map. The city was situated on an island with the same name in Fujian's province and connected to the mainland via a five-kilometre-long bridge. In addition, a ferry ran to the nearby UNESCO World Heritage Island of Gulang Yu (the distance couldn't have been more than a few hundred metres). Still, the long ferry line made me change my mind and head to the nearest hostel instead. Hard copies of anything, including maps and guidebooks, were increasingly difficult to locate, forcing me to invest in a smartphone, finally! Much of the day was spent trying to set the phone up and familiarise myself with my Internet

The internet and Wi-Fi were available, but Facebook and other foreign social networks were blocked. However, Skype worked, with the result that one wasn't completely cut off from the outside world.

A stroll downtown revealed a bustling and modern city sporting a large and modern department store on practically every corner. Line-shops were selling all the latest gadgets and brand names; there sure was no trace of the extreme poverty of three decades ago. The town was busy but well-organised and clean as a new pin. Not a tiny piece of paper could be seen anywhere.

Albeit a coffee culture took root in China, they remained a tea-drinking nation. Tea shops and tea houses abounded, and shops were stocked with beautiful tea sets, mostly quite costly. It further appeared the Chinese favour tiny teapots, barely











large enough to hold half a cup of tea.

BaiJaiCun Hostel was pleasant, offering comfortable rooms, dorms, and a cosy lounge area. It was located opposite Zhongshan Park, an old and well-established park where old men played card games under large overhanging trees. One-child families strolled or took peddle-boats on the canal—all in all, a delightful place to hang out.

The next day was spent exploring the city and it was a relief to find, amidst the concrete jungle, a real China where people carried their wares in baskets dangling from the ends of bamboo poles. Shopkeepers sat on pavements outside shops, sipping tea from delicate china.

Wandering about, one could find the strangest things: one being a market selling what looked like bits and pieces from almost every endangered species worldwide. Gosh, there were even things resembling rhino horn - maybe it was.

I found myself firmly entrenched in the land of chopsticks and tea, both sold in abundance at markets. I hoped my proficiency with chopsticks would improve.

Being a port city, the fish market was equally interesting, and a place where virtually every sea creature imaginable was on sale. A favourite appeared sandworm jelly. Sandworms were boiled into a jelly mould said to be rich in collagen. But wrinkly as I was, I gave the jelly a miss.

### **Xiamen – Zhangzhou, Fujian - 90 km**

What a frustrating day it turned out to be in this new country. My late departure was due to the assumption that the ride would be a short and easy cycle to Zhangzhou. Regrettably, most routes prohibited bicycles, and finding alternative roads took the best part of the day.

Riding into big and bustling Zhangzhou was in darkness but, luckily, it sported budget lodging right in the centre. However, the frustration of finding cycling routes







made me vow to buy a GPS. By the time the panniers were offloaded, a lack of food made me scurry to the nearest food vendors, and on my return, I curled up in front of the TV.

### **Zhangzhou – Yunxian - 101 km**

From Zhangzhou, finding the way was much more straightforward as Zhangzhou was on the G324. Everything was a tad larger than life in China. The G324 was considered a small road and allowed bicycles. However, it still had three lanes in both directions and was well-maintained. Even in mountainous areas, the gentle gradient made biking a pleasure.

The weather played along, and the day became a T-shirt and shorts day. The day was Chinese New Year's Eve and was noisily celebrated everywhere. My path led past firecracker-shooting villages, vast tea plantations and tea houses. Approximately 30 kilometres from Yunxian, a large mountain loomed ahead. Still, the Chinese took no prisoners and dug a tunnel - I was pretty happy about that.

Yunxian had a hotel right in the centre of town, adjacent to a park, which in hindsight wasn't the best location. Being Chinese New Year's Eve, fireworks started as soon as the clock struck midnight, and continued throughout the night. The fireworks of choice weren't the shoot-in-the-sky-type crackers but the machine-gun-type, which one could buy in big rolls, closely resembling machine gun ammo. You only needed to light the first one, which then set off the whole caboodle - bang, bang, bang, bang, it went all night. I understood it's tradition to make as much "din" as possible to chase off evil spirits.

### **Yunxian – Chaozhou, Guangdong - 122 km**

On leaving, the morning mist was still lying low over the city. The streets were eerily quiet and covered in red paper from the nightly firecrackers. Even the usual breakfast establishments were still firmly shut. This was because Chinese New Year was celebrated over 16 days and the first day of the new year was a time to honour one's elders. Hence, families visited their extended family's oldest and most senior members.







The way to Chaozhou was thus quiet making it a pleasant day of biking in excellent weather. The landscape and hazy views reminded me of old pictures of China featuring misty mountains in the background.

There was much rubber-necking, and I feared them dislocating their necks as they spun around to gaze at the foreigner. Later that day, a chap pulled up and informed me he'd never seen a foreign woman cycling in China.

The good conditions made pushing on to Chaozhou easy, but finding accommodation took almost as long as the day's ride. As expected, all reasonably priced places were full over New Year. Unfortunately, the most inexpensive hotels only cater to Chinese citizens. In the end, little option remained but to settle for a pricier abode as it was becoming dark and searching for accommodation was one of my pet hates.

Good use was made of the luxury room and all that was available. A meander downtown revealed dumplings and beer and with my bounty bagged, I returned to my digs for a hot and strong shower.

Each culture has its own idea of a bed. In China, the beds were rock hard and, seemingly, the fancier the hotel, the harder the bed. The bed was so hard my hip went numb, and I contemplated getting out my sleeping mat.

## **Chaozhou**

Early morning, less expensive digs were discovered at an inn down one of the alleys. At the fancy Chaozhou, I giggled as the staff didn't know what to do with a person on a bicycle. The porter looked awkward (although keen) trying to help pack the bike. Chaozhou was a historical and cultural city well known for its ancient temples. The remainder of the day was spent discovering its many attractions.

Taking the lack of Western tourists, feeling like the main attraction (other than Chaozhou's ancient temples) didn't come as a surprise. Nonetheless, I braved the crowds and stares and began investigating old Chaozhou's narrow walkways and



























temples. My effort was well rewarded as the buildings dated to the Silk Route days. Most remarkable was the Guangi Bridge, originally a 12th-century pontoon bridge. Even though the current bridge was from a much later era, it remained a pretty sight. In addition, a large section of the old city wall and its gates remained intact.

Paifang Jie (Street of Arches) offered an abundance of food and thus the place to head when hungry. Moon cakes were plentiful and immensely popular, but I still needed to develop a taste for this delicacy. It was a relief to discover that the western version of Chinese food or western-style fortune cookies didn't exist in China.

To me, China was a land of contradictions. All things were off the scale massive, yet, they drank tea out of kiddie's tea sets. They were conservative yet modern. Construction occurred at a tremendous rate, and still an old world prevailed, featuring narrow lanes where residents used pedicabs (albeit electric-assisted).

China's one-child policy also seemed a bit of a myth and it was not uncommon to see people with more than one child. Campaigns encouraged people to have only one child, but many had more than one. I was told only one child received free benefits. Parents had to pay for the other children's education, healthcare, etc. This arrangement seemed fair to me. Nevertheless, a person from a one-child family could legally have two children who received free benefits. Families from minority groups could have more than one child, but those employed by the government were only allowed one child. I tip my hat to the Chinese, as they are the only country where politicians are expected to lead by example.

## **Chaozhou**

Chaozhou was immensely touristy, and rightly so, as the town had a fascinating history dating to the Maritime Silk Route trade era. Chaozhou was most famous for its opera, a traditional art form dating back over 500 years and based on folk











dances and ballads. Clowns and females were the most distinctive characters in a Chaozhou opera. Fan-playing and acrobatic skills were more prominent than in other types of performances. I didn't see a show but discovered a tiny shop that made gowns, headdresses, etc., for the operatic stage.

Gongfu tea, first drunk in the Song Dynasty, still seemed in high demand, and it appeared that it remained an essential part of Chaozhou's social life. In addition, teahouses played Chaozhou music, which included string instruments, gongs and drums, all very soothing.

### **Chaozhou – Cheonan - 93 km**

Again, the weather was excellent. Maybe winter was over, or it was only a warm spell, but I wasn't complaining. My route still followed the G324, which ran through built-up areas for much of the day. The ride wasn't scenic, but the area wasn't mountainous either. I only once attempted an alternative route but went around in circles. I thought better of it and stayed on the G324 until I could locate a GPS.

China's development was mind-boggling, but it seemed to enhance the experience when finding "Old China". However, these finds weren't around every corner but one could still see pedicabs carting people to and from markets at a pittance. However, the food was reason enough to encourage anyone to visit China. The veggies were fresh, crisp and tasty, and other favourites included dim sum, noodles, dumplings, wonton soup and more. By evening, the bicycle was hardly offloaded and I hurried to the nearest food vendor. I decided it was best not to ask what was inside - the food was delicious, and that was all that counted.

The 7 Days Inn impressed with its quality of finishes, but a pity the Wi-Fi was less than acceptable. At least, the connection allowed uploading a photo to my Photo of the Day project, but then it died.



### **Cheonan – Lufeng, Guangdong - 111 km**

The route to Lufeng wasn't exactly picturesque, as the first part of the ride ran through a built-up area. The countryside wasn't much better as the fog hung low and visibility was down to a few hundred metres.

The Chinese were quite friendly, and those who could speak English usually stopped to chat. A friendly chap on a scooter pulled up and we chatted for a while. I enquired regarding a map of Guangdong Province and he said to follow him. We located a map at a bookshop, which he kindly paid for.

On arriving in Lugeng, the road passed an inexpensive-looking place and I decided to stay. Each room (even budget ones) had a complimentary sealed comb, toothbrush, toothpaste and shower cap.

This day marked the fifth day of the Lunar Festival or Chinese New Year and, officially, the end of winter and the first day of spring, and it is tradition to eat spring rolls on the day. The day further revealed a few taboos: no sweeping the floor and no scissors. People were shooting firecrackers this time to scare away poverty. Still, I assumed the noise enough to scare away poverty and wealth. The news revealed that 108 million people travelled by train during the first week of the holidays. I was happy in a very un-touristy part of China.

### **Lufeng – Huidong, Guangdong - 135 km**

I woke to a drizzle, but it wasn't cold, and the cold front brought a tailwind. With that in my favour, I pushed on to make the best of the good conditions. Nothing much came of the rain and, by midday, my rain jacket came off.

The route ran past vast fields of strawberries where one could pick your own, but I only stopped to snap a few pics. The traffic was irritating as vehicles drove on the wrong side of the road or turned without looking or warning. The random hooting further defeated the purpose.















The sixth day of the New Year was sending away the ghost of poverty. As a result, people discarded old clothes and rubbish and, at roadside shrines, lit candles to lighten the road for the ghost of poverty.

At the first hotel in Huidong, the receptionist ignored me. The Chinese seem to do that. When they don't like a situation they ignore it, hoping it will disappear. It worked, as I went to the adjacent hotel.

At a reception desk, it is pretty obvious what a person was there for. A limited number of questions and answers should conclude the deal. Theoretically, it should be easy. Besides that, the phrase, "I want a single room. How much is the room per person per night?" was written down and all they had to do was read it. Still the staff became so flabbergasted that they couldn't even read Mandarin. At least when it came to food, one could point to what you wanted.

### **Huidong – Zengcheng - 120 km**

According to legend, Nüwa was the goddess who created the world. On the seventh day after creating the world, Nüwa created human beings from (obviously) yellow clay. On that day, with the divine power entrusted to her, Nüwa made the clay figurines come to life (I always surmised God was a woman). The seventh day of the New Year, therefore, celebrated the event.

This could be an event celebrated at home as the road was dead quiet. However, as soon as someone could speak English, they would ask: "Why are you travelling alone?" I was subsequently informed that for the average Chinese person travelling alone to a foreign country was the most unsettling and terrifying experience they could imagine.

China was developing at a head-spinning rate, but the ever-present water features gave even built-up areas a peaceful vibe. My hotel, hence, featured a massive water feature. Water in front and mountains behind was one of the most positive feng shui layouts feng shui masters have always sought. Therefore, most buildings,











especially hotels, featured water fountains or koi ponds at the entrance.

### **Zengcheng – Guangzhou, Guangdong – 80 km**

On departing, the route led past a large, impressive city park, and the abundance of greenery took the sting out of the concrete jungle. Even though new and significant developments were taking place everywhere, these developments included plenty of parks, large and spacious pavements and separate bicycle/motorbike lanes, making these new megacities more bearable.

The path west continued over the hills and past rural settlements until reaching Guangzhou. Guangzhou, known historically as Canton (from the Canton Trade Fair), was the capital and largest city in Guangdong province. Situated along the Pearl River, the town had a pretty setting. It is the third largest city in China with a population of 19 million.

It took forever to cycle to the hostel. I stuck to the Inner Ring Road like glue, hoping the road would eventually spit me out close to the hostel. On reaching the intersection which turned off from the Ring Road to cross the river, I didn't find a bridge as expected. Still, a ferry carted citizens and bicycles across at a Yuan. I followed suit and uncovered the ferry dock on the opposite side, right at the hostel door. How lucky was that? The hostel had a pretty setting on the Pearl River, the third-longest river in China, measuring more than 2,000 kilometres.

While unpacking, the weather came in, and I considered it a luxury curling up under a fluffy duvet.

I went from shorts and T-shirt to all bundled up overnight. The cold front brought freezing weather, howling wind and bucketing rain. Happy as the proverbial pig, I watched the dreadful weather through the window.

With time on my hands, I took the plunge and ordered a Garmin GPS, which meant staying in Guangdong for a few days until it arrived. The delivery time was a mystery, but the weather was miserable and waiting not a big deal.



A break in the weather allowed for exploring this delightfully different country. Old yet modern, conservative but up to the minute, frantically busy yet peaceful. I dawdled around this vast city which was downright placid and beautiful in the absence of the masses, whom all seemed to have gone home to their families for the holidays.

This normally atheist nation appeared incredibly open to the "opium of the masses". Religious stats are a tad of a slippery fish. Still, approximately 30% of the adult population followed Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Islam or other beliefs and the remaining 70% considered themselves atheists. It must've been a highly active 30% as a temple appeared around every corner. The many temples weren't surprising as I always thought China was the cradle of religious philosophies like Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These three philosophical teachings clearly played a significant role in shaping Chinese culture.

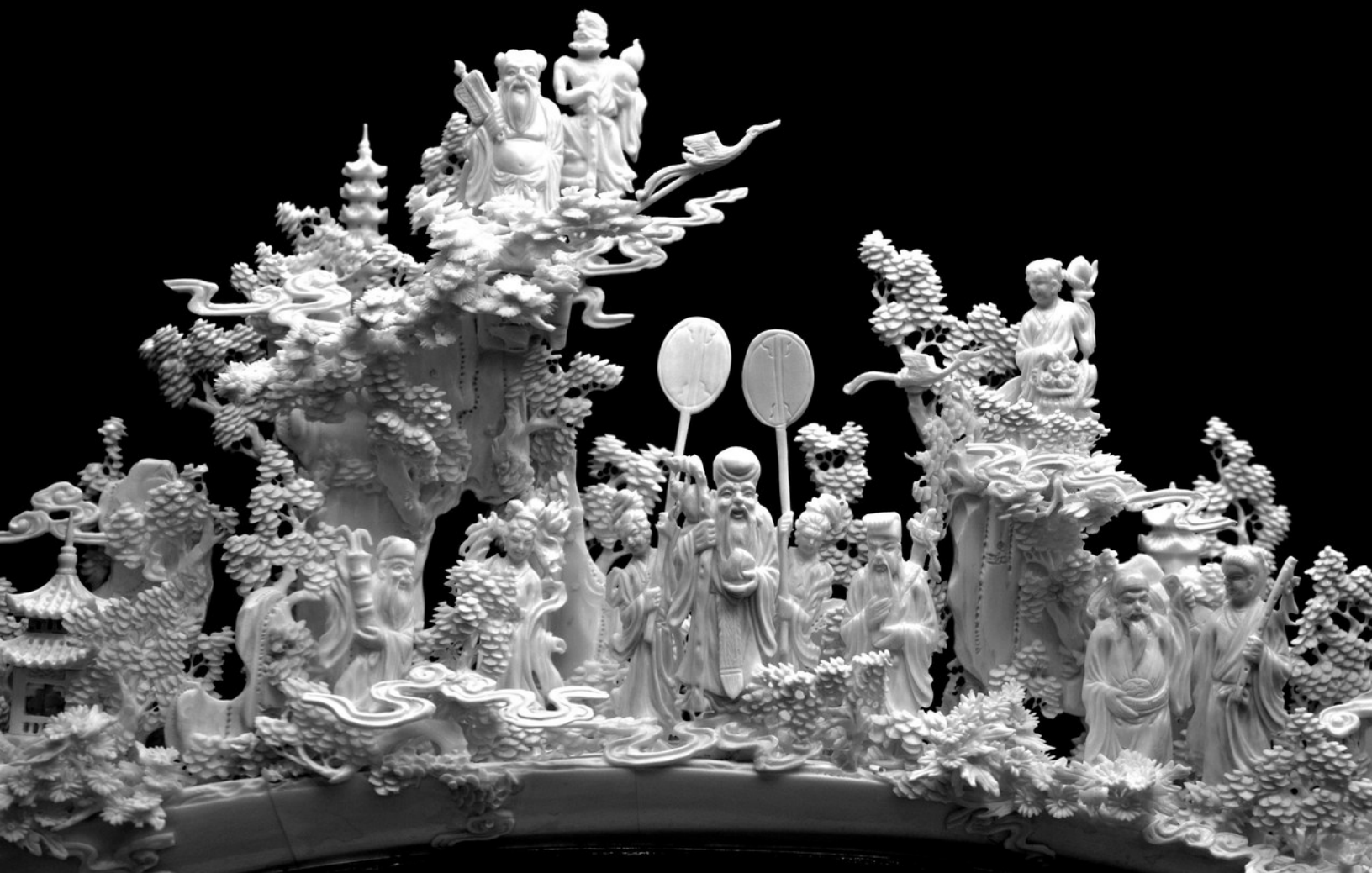
Although a big and modern city, I assumed it would have an old part as Guangzhou had a rich history dating back to the ancient Silk Route days. As expected, it didn't take long to find narrow, winding streets revealing small, dark and dusty workshops where coppersmiths were bent over their work, oblivious of me.

I operated in low gear as I suspected the Garmin would take a few days to arrive. I strolled past antique shops sporting exquisite ceramic vases, beautiful furniture and jade carvings. Still, I sauntered along tree-lined canals and past old colonial buildings, constructed by the British and French in the 19th century after being granted permission to set up warehouses.

## **Guangzhou**

I took to the streets, and down a narrow pedestrian lane found the humble house of the Father of Chinese Railways. The union for actors playing martial arts and acrobatic roles in Cantonese opera was down an adjacent street. Interestingly, the house next door was the ancestral house of Bruce Lee, not surprising, as his father was a Cantonese opera actor.



















The most exquisite ivory (albeit politically incorrect) carvings were displayed at one of the temples. Whether or not one approved, you couldn't help but be in awe of the incredible detail. Sadly, my photography didn't do the carvings any justice. I further learned ivory trading in China wasn't open to all. At the beginning of that year, the government destroyed more than six tons of illegal ivory. Ivory trading was legal, provided it came from a government-registered dealer. In addition, each carving had to carry a certificate of provenance.

My next stop was at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, built by the French after the Second Opium War. It was made entirely of granite featuring two massive towers, each standing 48 metres high.

Returning, I stopped at the supermarket but shopping remained challenging. While already standing out like a sore thumb, taking pictures was equally challenging. Still, at times, it felt like I was only different once. After that, everything you do (acceptable or not) is written off as you being a foreigner.

The temperature plummeted to a mere seven °C, and I thought it best to stay put until the weather improved. It's pretty quite unbelievable how the weather can change. Frozen solid, I wondered what happened to my resolution of "Never to leave the tropics again". The strangest thing was that the hostel didn't offer heating and resembled a fridge. Mercifully, my sleeping bag came in handy and I thought it time to head south.

## **Guangzhou**

Nothing came from the Garmin ordered, and a taxi took me to a large centre selling electronic equipment. One was bound to find something there and locating the Garmin stand was easy. Unfortunately, they didn't have the one I was looking for. Ultimately, I bought a pricier one providing loads of features I would most likely never use. However, the store owner was kind enough to install an English China map and the rest of the evening was spent fiddling with the Garmin. I had my doubts about this expensive toy.















### **Guangzhou - Jun'anzhen - 82 km**

I was like a child with a new toy and couldn't wait to fit it on the bike and start riding. Occasionally, I checked the map to see if I was on the right track as I only partially trusted the GPS. However, it worked like a charm and directed me to Jun'anzhen, which had a hotel. The rest of the evening was spent downloading the day's information—quite a magical little thing. Small things do indeed amuse small minds!

### **Jun'anzhen – Chikan, Kaiping, Guangdong – 101 km**

I clipped in the Garmin and resumed my ride through the countryside, and what a charming place Guangdong province turned out. The way led past ancient-looking hamlets and along canals until arriving in the Kaiping district.

The landscape around Kaiping was most remarkable, revealing several small but old communities housing fortified multi-storey towers constructed in the 1920s and 30s. The towers (diaolou) served two purposes: housing and protecting against bandits. These towers weren't exactly ancient - the oldest was barely over 100 years old, but they were pretty remarkable. The towers were scattered around the countryside, and the plan was to visit them the following day. There were approximately 1,833 diaolou still standing in Kaiping. Twenty of the most symbolic ones were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

### **Around Kaiping – 40 km**

With the weather still bitterly cold and dressed in warm clothing, I headed off into the countryside. First, to the pretty village of Zili, where most of the towers were.

The story goes: In the mid-19th century things weren't going too well in the region. Slavery was outlawed in most Western countries, creating a need for cheap labour. Many people in the area were recruited and good pay and working conditions were promised. However, workers were made to work as labourers under terrible conditions. Of the millions of Chinese workers who left many died, and only a few became wealthy and returned. They brought with them wealth and exotic ideas. The towers were built to protect their families from bandits, flooding and Japanese troops.



### **Chikan – Yangjiang – 95 km**

On leaving Chikan, the weather was foggy and the visibility poor. Still, the going was easy, and there was no reason to stop as I had the breeze on my back. A few towers were sprinkled about, but nothing interesting happened. So, with the iPod stuck in my ears and to the tune of good old "Brucey", I stepped on the pedals and cycled the 100 kilometres to Yangjiang.

### **Yangjiang – Dianbai – 105 km**

The mornings were foggy and once I attached a flashing light and donned my bright yellow rain jacket, I proceeded in a westerly direction towards Hainan, where the climate was rumoured to be milder. Unfortunately, even if not cold, it started drizzling, and I pulled into Dianbai.

### **Dianbai – Zhanjiang – 113 km**

The stretch between Dianbai and Zhanjiang was effortless biking, albeit still misty and with light rain. With little of interest, I played with my electronic toys, which I had a growing number of by then. None, however, did me any good, and the fancy Garmin was still to find me a meaningful place or route. Google Maps was doing a better job at finding things.

The day turned out another 120-kilometre ride, and on slinking into Zhanjiang, I encountered a bridge where cycling wasn't allowed. The Garmin pointed me to the ferry port where bikes and motorbikes were ferried across and onto a cheap(ish) hotel. I, subsequently, discovered it was not a river but an inlet of the South China Sea.

A desperate need to do laundry called for staying an additional day. Unable to find a laundromat, I started doing the laundry, but the hotel staff came to the rescue. However, it was unclear when the laundry would be returned, and I set off to the shops. Shopping, typically, took double the time than anywhere else, and I spent nearly the entire day finding the few items needed.

My abode was opposite the market, making it easy to pop in for a bite. But convinced the meal contained dog meat, I went without supper (of course, it could've been my imagination).







### **Zhanjiang – Leizhou – 60 km**

Luckily, the laundry was returned in time, and as the internet stated a ferry operated between Zhanjiang and Hainan, I searched for the jetty. Unfortunately, there wasn't much information regarding the boat and I couldn't find any sign of it. Maybe, it didn't exist. A minor road ran further south in Hainan's direction. Still, being already late, I thought I would only reach the island after dark and settled for a night in Leizhou.

### **Leizhou – Haikou, Hainan Island – 105 km**

I hadn't seen any Westerners since my arrival in China a month ago. Thus, it was common to get a few stares as I was completely different from the Chinese, in practically every way. My every move was scrutinised and the fact that I was travelling solo wasn't something the Chinese could wrap their heads around. While they didn't say it, it looked as if they felt sorry for me, you could see it in their eyes. The Chinese didn't understand why someone would want to take a vacation to a foreign country by themselves.

People on scooters could cause accidents how they swung around to look, and people in cars slowed down, holding up their toddlers to get a glimpse at this foreign woman. Likewise, stopping to get a drink was something of a circus. Some were curious, and others were scared; several came closer, a few kept their distance, some pointed, and others giggled. I must've surprised a little boy as all he could utter was, "WOW". His little sister was equally dumbstruck; her eyes went big, her mouth fell open, and she quickly retreated a few steps.

Not having spoken to anyone in weeks, I feared losing my voice. With the iPod blaring in my ears, I sang along at the top of my lungs. I sped off over the hills bellowing the lyrics of "Cocaine" and "I Shot the Sheriff". I got a few more strange looks but threw in a "Ni-hao" and a wave and continued belting out songs' lyrics from yesteryear. And to think, all while entirely sober.















## **Haikou, Hainan**

Once in Haikou I had to do the dreaded visa extension and paid for two nights' accommodation at the Banana Hostel. First thing the following morning, I hunted down the Public Security Bureau (PSB). I couldn't believe I'd been in China for an entire month. Locating the office was easy, but the counter was closed and I was told to return after 14h30. I further required a note/letter of sorts from the hostel. After obtaining the necessary items, I returned to the PSB. The process consisted of a fair amount of "form-filling-in". Once photographed and fingerprinted, I was told to collect the visa in four days. Fortunately, Haikou had loads of interest and thus enough to keep me occupied.

I stayed in Haikou and did little apart from meandering the city's old part revealing many antique shops. The amble also gave me ample time to play with the macro lens.

Four days passed and, eventually, it was time to pick up the visa. Returning, I followed my nose down crooked alleys and curving streets. The smell of fresh dumplings and roadside barbecues hung in the air as old men played board games in parks while cigarettes dangled from their lips.

## **Haikou – Wenchang – 109 km**

Hainan was a popular cycling destination amongst young people, and I encountered many college kids en route to Wenchang. Unfortunately, the ride was unimpressive, and even the beach area was horrible, revealing far too many high-rises and dust from new developments. In addition, I battled a stiff breeze all day.

## **Wenchang - Bo'ao - 66 km**

In contrast, the following day, a short and pleasant day of pedalling led to Bo'ao, through small villages and past farmlands where crops were ready to be harvested. Fish farms were going ten to a dozen, and small shrines lined the road where devotees burned incense to their preferred deities.

As the island was a popular multi-day cycling destination, I again met a few cyclists. Bo'ao had a cheapish room, dumplings and beer, making it an excellent place to overnight.











### **Bo'ao - 50 km**

Twenty-five kilometres beyond Bo'ao, I realised I didn't have my GoPro. Convinced the camera was left behind, I returned to the hotel in Bo'ao. Once there, of course, there was no sign of the camera but I stayed the night, only to uncover the camera in one of my panniers!

A short stroll led to a beach, sporting a temple rich in colours, textures and light. Nevertheless, the deities were enough to put the fear of God into anyone. Returning, I stumbled across a delightful little coffee shop housed in an old, traditional stone house. A lovely, leafy garden provided wooden tables under giant umbrellas. Inside, the cafe was chock-a-block with antiques and arty bits and bobs. Last but not least, the coffee was served in real China.

### **Bo'ao – Xinglong - 95 km**

The many cyclists encountered were all on their way to Xinglong. As the town was said to be the location of a hot spring, I followed suit. Not feeling too well - it must've been something I ate - I nonetheless pushed on to Xinglong. The cyclists I met earlier had already located budget accommodation and pointed me in the right direction.

Xinglong was over-developed and touristy, and I didn't even search for the well-known hot spring as I could imagine what that would be like. Instead, seeing I'd pick up a knee problem, I spent the evening indoors.

### **Xinglong – Sanya - 118 km**

There was little one could do concerning the knee, and though the map indicated a hilly stretch, I continued over the mountains. The strange thing was the knee was 100% while riding, weird.

A pleasant cycle led past rural hamlets and farmlands before hitting big and lively Sanya with its 20-kilometre-long stretch of beach. I went straight to Dadong Hai, where the map indicated a hostel. Backpacker Hostel turned out pleasant and was tucked away behind high-rises and slap-bang in the middle of the action - a real haven.



The following day was spent doing close to zero, only wandering to the beach and around the corner to find food. Surprisingly enough, the dominant languages, both spoken and written, were Chinese and Russian. With sunshine year-round, temperatures hovered around 25°C, even in January and Sanya, consequently, was immensely touristy. The area produced pearls in abundance which were sold all over the place. Giant clams were considered endangered, but shells were sold just about everywhere.

As the town was an excellent place to hang out, and had interesting people to talk to, one more day was spent there. Still concerned about my knee, a knee guard was purchased. I rubbed the knee with locally purchased Chinese lotion and slipped on a tight knee guard, most likely made for thin Chinese legs and not my stompers.

### **Sanya – Huangliu - 103 km**

After packing up and taking a few pics in the company of the hostel staff, I started out through the town area in a westerly direction. Thirty-five kilometres beyond Sanya, a large Buddhist temple complex begged to be explored.

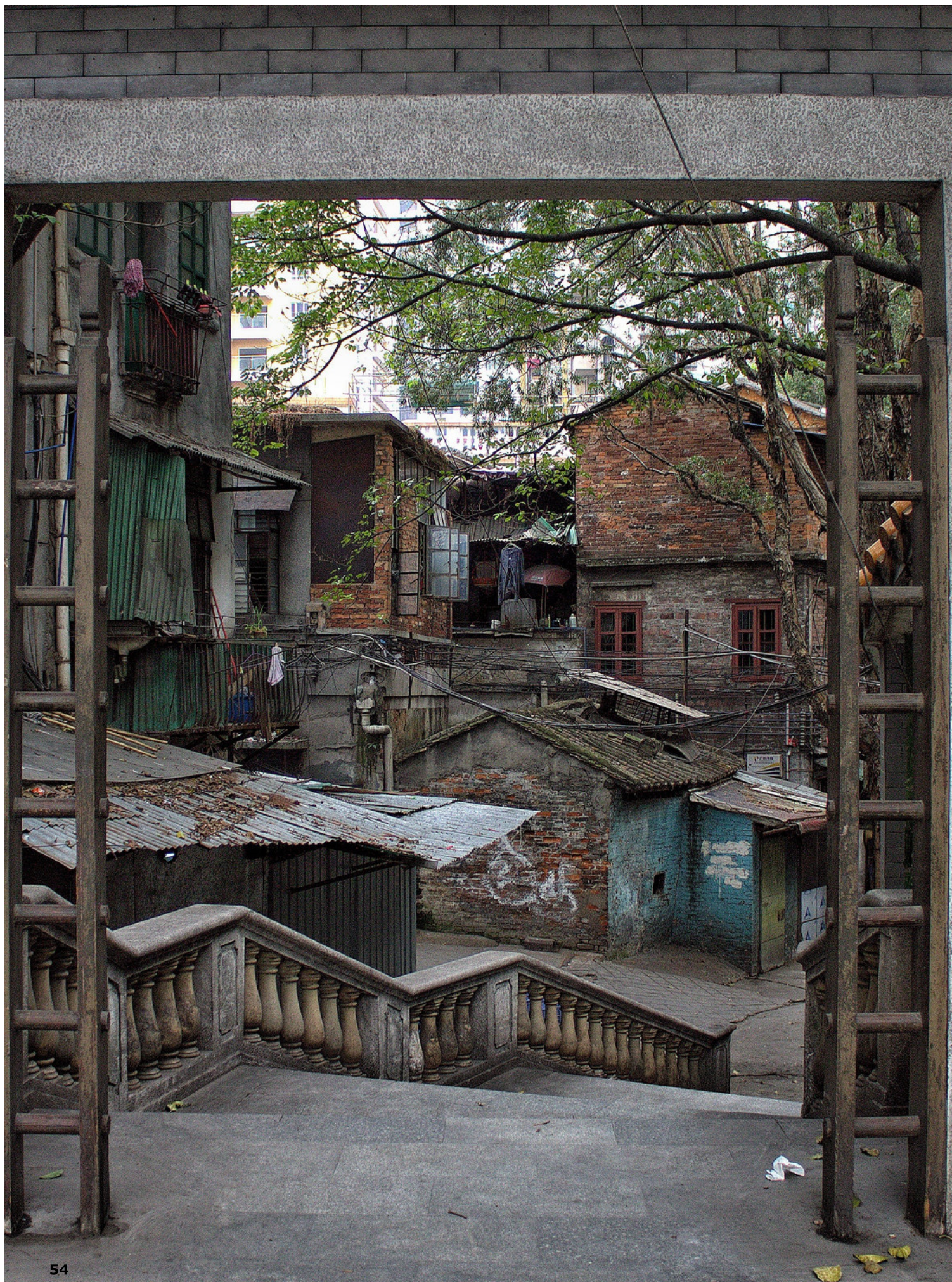
The place was swarming with tourists, and thousands milled about. I couldn't understand the hefty entrance fee to such a fake and artificial setup. Nevertheless, I joined the madness, snapped a few pics, and hurriedly escaped. It must be mentioned that at the centre of this spectacle stood a 108-metre-tall Buddha statue on a man-made island, larger than the Statue of Liberty!

The rest of the day was more "normal" – past small hamlets until spotting a welcoming-looking guesthouse featuring a few mobile food carts and I called it a day.















### **Huangliu – Changjiang - 128 km**

It turned out a pleasant cycle through a beautiful countryside past small traditional communities where farmers still ploughed the field in old-fashioned ways. Changjiang offered accommodation on the main road, signalling the end of the day's ride.

Mercifully, these new and large cities weren't as daunting as they appeared from further afield. Seeing that they were well planned, things were where one expected them to be. The roads were wide and traffic flowed freely. The separate cycle- and motorbike lanes further made biking easy.

### **Changjiang – Jialai - 116 km**

Time was spent packing up before pointing the bicycle toward Haikou, again meeting other cyclists and a journalist who took a few shots and asked a few questions. The scenery was particularly lush and green. I assumed it was a tree-planting project, as trees were everywhere, and I thought it was too organised to be natural. However, the authorities beautified the road with dense and colourful plants, making the ride even more pleasant. Not thinking one would find accommodation along the route, it was a surprise to stumble upon a small village sporting 50-yuan rooms.

As was the norm by then, I popped across the road to get a takeaway meal, as eating under such intense scrutiny remained uncomfortable. While waiting for the noodles, bystanders didn't take their eyes off me for a second. Being stared at like that wasn't very comfortable. They didn't even blink while inspecting my feet and hair and were shocked by my bare arms, which, to their horror, had clearly been exposed to the sun.

### **Jialai – Haikou - 108 km**

Due to the perfect weather – overcast but not cold – I set off in high spirit. The way ran past many scenic hamlets where I stopped to buy lunch but carried the food to Haikou (due to the staring), where the Banana Hostel was again my abode of choice.























## **Haikou**

Outside Haikou was a volcano park and, not expecting much, I still veered in that direction. According to geologists, the last eruption occurred roughly 13,000 years ago. One could hike up to the old crater rim which overlooked the countryside. The crater rim revealed a view of more craters in the distance, said almost 36 in total.

Far more exciting was the nearby Rongtang village: a historic, lava-rock community built entirely from volcanic rock. The town was constructed roughly 900 years ago. Rongtang was largely abandoned, but a few elders live in this unique historic settlement. Surprisingly, the area still had old lava tunnels. A 90-year-old lady (all bent over) offered to show me the tunnels. So, we set out, homemade torch in hand (bamboo, cloth and paraffin). Many of these caves were interconnected and were used as hiding places from the Japanese during the war.

## **Haikou**

The days came and went, and I hung around the hostel, not doing a great deal. A crowd from the Hash House Harriers (primarily Australians) were in town for their annual get-together - they were a pleasant bunch.

There was little one could do about losing a lens cover but saunter downtown to find another one. The stroll was a pleasant one through the old quarters and city park. The parks were large, lush and provided plenty of water, making them peaceful places to stroll and watch people do Tai-chi. The pavements were lined with hawkers, selling colourful umbrellas, steaming pots of corn-on-the-cob, and rice in banana leaves.











## **Haikou, Hainan – Beihai, Guangxi - By ferry**

Departing the hostel to cycle to the port, I ran into a German couple on bikes. We chatted a while before I realised they had a small child in the trailer. Their 4-year-old daughter was quite happy sitting in the trailer listening to stories—what a remarkable family. I could barely get myself up the hills, let alone pull a child and trailer.

Instead of returning to the mainland the way I came, I assumed it more interesting to go via Beihai, slightly more west, saving me from backtracking the 150 kilometres to Zhanjiang.

Surprisingly, I was somewhat of a celebrity on the ferry (LOL). A few days earlier, an article covering my travels was printed in the paper, and almost everyone knew I was South African. Mainly, they were astounded that I had sold all my possessions. My newfound fame got me a cabin all to myself. Being an overnight ferry, the boat only departed at around 7 p.m.

## **Beihai, Guangxi – 6 km**

The ferry arrived in Beihai, dead on time, but I couldn't locate the bike lock key. Give me strength! Where could it have gone in such a small cabin? There wasn't anything to do but cut the lock. Once on terra firma, I met two German ladies travelling by bicycle waiting to catch the Hainan ferry. They started off hitchhiking but somewhere along the line bought bikes and continued their travels by bicycle. By then, they'd been travelling almost a year and a half. From the harbour was a short six-kilometres to 21 Degree Hostel, situated right in the old part and a convenient place to stay.

Beihai had a wonderful old part, a bustling river and a fishing harbour, making it exciting sightseeing. Trundling through the historic quarters, music coming from an open doorway called for an investigation and I was promptly waved in—what a pleasant thing to sit there and listen to them rehearsing.

By morning, fog and a howling wind made staying put. The market was, as always, a fascinating and colourful place. The veggies were fresh and plentiful. Only the seafood was slightly out of the ordinary, as the Chinese seemingly ate the strangest sea creatures. Then, on the other hand, it could've been bait. The oysters weren't eaten raw (like barbarians do) but cooked on coals and sprinkled with spices.



















The Chinese food was delicious, super fresh, crisp and tasty. One could pick your seafood from the tank, which the chef cooked in whatever manner one preferred.

### **Beihai – Qinzhou, Guangxi - 106 km**

Leaving Beihai, the fog slowly rose, revealing small and quaint fishing hamlets. To my one side was the ocean and to the other, an inlet or river with picturesque and busy harbours. The path eventually left the coast and slowly veered inland through dense forestry plantations and past sawmills and other wood-related works.

At a traffic light, I stopped next to a lady on a tricycle. I said, "Ni-hau" and she said, "Hello." We laughed as we knew these two words were the total of our foreign language vocabulary. She continued in Chinese, and I replied in English: "Yes, I am going to Nanning and I am from South Africa." One never knows. Maybe that's what she asked. Then, the light changed, and we waved goodbye like old friends.

### **Qinzhou – Nanning, Guangxi - 127 km**

Shortly after departing Qinzhou, the route deteriorated as it veered inland over the mountains to Nanning. Not much further, the road turned into a muddy, potholed mess, to such an extent that it required walking the bike through the thick mud.

Covered in mud, I battled onwards, fearing it would be impossible to reach Nanning that day. Then, as if this wasn't enough, a bee stung me on the jaw. Halfway to Nanning, a restaurant provided an outside tap, allowing spraying the bicycle down. Still, soon the chain and gears were all clogged again.

This condition prevailed until virtually 30 kilometres from Nanning. Then, finally, I crawled into Nanning at around 18h00, covered in mud and dead tired, only to find the hostel I had in mind had closed. Give me strength! Not eating all day, I was in no mood to search for a different hostel and decided I'll book into the first hotel spotted.















Shortly before nine, I cycled to the nearby Green Forest Hostel, where a room was nearly as expensive as the hotel (I could've taken a dorm bed, which would've been way cheaper, but I had a plan). But at least there were people to talk to, and I could do the usual rest day chores and wash my muddy panniers (in the shower). It turned out to be Spring Day and a good day to do spring cleaning. I stayed at the hostel as they arranged Vietnamese visas at no added cost. Vietnam was within striking distance, and the plan was to head that way. So, after handing in the passport, all I had to do was wait.

## **Nanning**

With plenty of time on my hands, a stroll into town revealed an outdoor store. The intriguing thing was that the shop sold chopsticks and a spoon instead of the usual lightweight knife, spoon and fork set used for camping or hiking. Now, why did that surprise me?

A cool thing about hostels is that they are mainly well situated, close to almost anything. The Green Forest was no exception and, best of all, close to the night market – my favourite eating place. The only negative thing was they were located on the third floor, and one had to schlep the bike and panniers up two sets of stairs. In China, as in other countries, they refer to the ground floor as 1st floor, then 2nd floor and then 3rd floor, whereas, at home, we usually say ground floor, 1st floor, and 2nd floor.

I awaited the night market's opening to get my wonton soup. I understood the literal English translation of the word "wonton" was swallowing a cloud; quite an apt description when looking at the dumplings floating in the soup, and they were delicious.

## **Nanning**

Determined to get pictures of modern Nanning, I enthusiastically started down the pedestrian mall, past lines and lines of designer stores.

China was remarkable, and I was in awe of its achievements. They managed to raise over 400 million people out of extreme poverty in 20 years - 14 years ahead of their 2015 target date. Of course, people quickly point out China's negatives, but their success in the battle against poverty was undeniable.







Back to my story of the day, there were opportunities to capture modern Nanning. Still, behind MacDonald's, Pizza Hut and KFC were tiny alleys. I weakened and headed off down the dark and narrow lane. The area was a fascinating one. People still pushed building materials in three-wheeled carts, laundry hung from lines strung across the cobblestone lanes, and red lanterns adorned traditional single-storey dwellings. Doorways led to unknown destinations, and sagging tiled roofs, crooked windows and doors made far more interesting pictures than the modern structures. Great was my excitement when, by rounding a corner, I came upon the silversmith hard at work, melting and pounding tiny silver pellets into fine jewellery.

My passport and Vietnamese visa returned, leaving only three more visa pages, meaning I needed an SA Embassy.

As the day wore on, I wasn't sure going to Vietnam was such a good idea. Having already cycled Vietnam, the only reason for going there was to pass the time (waiting until the weather improved) before heading to Shanghai, situated in the opposite direction. However, the more I looked at my options, the more apparent it became that it would be a costly diversion, whatever my decision.

### **Nanning - Tong' an - By bus**

Emerging, I still wasn't 100% sure which direction to go. The first stop was at the train station to inquire regarding a train to Xiamen, where I started, and from where the plan was to head east. No train operated between Nanning and Xiamen (or at least not one on which one could take the bicycle). I'm convinced there was but surmised it involved a change of trains and was too troublesome for the Chinese to explain in their limited English.

This was all too much trouble, and better to head out of town in the direction of Vietnam. In the process, the road led past the bus station. I stopped to enquire, and by 14h30, was on a sleeper bus en route to Xiamen. How was that for a change of plans? Actually, it wasn't a change of plans. The idea from the start was to head west to Nanning before returning to Xiamen and then cycle towards Shanghai to catch a ferry to South Korea.















The bus was comfy and provided (small) individual beds (barely wide enough for me), but at least one could be horizontal. How long the ride would take wasn't clear, and all settled in for the (anticipated) long haul. Said an express bus, we hardly stopped. Only once, at around 20h00, did the bus stop, allowing all to grab a bite to eat.

### **Tong'an, Fujian – 20 km**

At around 7h00, I was woken with a start and was informed I had reached my destination. The bus had stopped beside the highway, and disorientated I hurriedly stumbled off the bus. I felt somewhat abandoned being left like that.

My phone told me I was twenty kilometres outside Tong'an. Luckily, it was unnecessary to approach anyone to ask where I was. Imagine that! Far too tired to cycle onto the next town, I opted for the shorter 20 kilometres ride to a nearby hotel. With all my devices on charge, I showered, got something to eat, and took a nap.

### **Tong' an – Quanzhou, Fujian - 90 km**

The following day was effortless riding to the massive city of Quanzhou. It took pedalling quite some time before eventually crawling into what was known as the old part.

My second month's visa was to expire in three days. So, extending the visa in Quanzhou seemed a good idea before proceeding. Still, the person dealing with the visa wasn't in the office and I was told to return the following day.

The old part turned out interesting and offered several beautiful temples. The parks were massive, pleasant and well-planned. People were running, walking, boating, and the parks even offered piped music. I found no less than three parks in the three-kilometre amble to the old mosque.

By morning, I returned to the police station – only to be told they didn't issue visas at that branch, and I wondered how they didn't know this the previous day. Still, they kindly gave me a ride and then pointed me toward the visa office.







Sadly, I was informed they couldn't extend an already extended visa. So now, what was that all about? I subsequently learned that Quanzhou was notoriously problematic for extending visas.

I could've tried at another town but ran out of time and couldn't waste one more day. My best option (I presumed) was to retreat to Hong Kong and apply for a new Chinese visa. At the bus station, a ticket was purchased to Hong Kong. The bus only departed the following day at 21h00, and I understood it would reach the border after 10 hours.

Once all the formalities were done, enough time remained to investigate the area. In the process, I came upon the Qingjing Mosque, built in 1009, making it the oldest in China.

## **Quanzhou**

I was operating in low gear as there was little more to do but drink coffee and visit old temples. Eventually, the time came to board the bus. Luckily, it was a "sleeping" bus, sporting little bunk beds, and one could lie comfortably.

## **Quanzhou, China - Hong Kong**

At seven o'clock the following morning, the bus reached the border. Once safely out of China, I asked the bus driver to let me off. I continued by bicycle just to be stopped by police a few kilometres further and told that it was illegal to cycle on these roads. There wasn't a single road in the immediate vicinity one could use to cycle into the city. A few minutes later, the very bus I was on came by and picked me up again. LOL.

Once on Hong Kong Island, I thought it safe to try again. Wow, what a busy and built-up place it was. Skyscrapers and high-rise buildings filled the skyline, and busses and trams crisscrossed the island. I felt small and insignificant as I tried to avoid colliding with any of them.

Priority was to find accommodation in this mega-expensive city. I soon learned the World Rugby-7s were held that weekend and every conceivable hole was filled to the brim. Things were not going my way.







Eventually, digs were found at Alisan Guesthouse. Unfortunately, only the "staff" room was available, meaning the room was terribly small, with only a tiny bed. Considered cheap in Hong Kong, I took it and searched for a place to stay that night as the room was only available from the following day.

Only the Holiday Inn still had space which should tell you something about its value for money. Arrangements were made with Carlos, a friend of mine, who lived in Hong Kong at the time. Carlos had a meeting on the island, and once done, we met for coffee and a long chat, as it had been a few years since we last spoke.

### **Hong Kong – Seoul, South Korea - By plane**

My stay in Hong Kong was significantly longer than anticipated as I needed to renew my Chinese visa and apply for a new South African passport.

Stuck in Hongkong there was no other option than to fly out and it was more than a month before a short taxi ride took me and my meagre belongings to the airport. Once again, the overweight baggage fee was shocking, but there was nothing one could do but pay and get the job over and done with. The flight from Hong Kong touched down in Seoul three hours later and although I couldn't draw money I could at least pay by card—what a pain. Priority was thus to contact the bank and I could only hope all would be sorted out by morning. Phew!







# About this Book

This book accounts for my cycle ride along the South Coast of China from Xiamen to Nanning. If the intention is to use this book as a cycle touring guide, then please keep the following in mind:

## **The distances**

Daily distances in this book may not be the shortest between two points as I tended to deviate occasionally. The daily kilometres recorded were, however, accurate according to my odometer. The reading often varied from distance markers and maps, and sometimes over- or under-read. I always noted the kilometres at the end of the day, which might have included going to the market or searching for accommodation.

## **Time of year and date**

This book accounts for my visit to China between January and March 2014. Many things could've changed, and roads may now be in better or worse condition. Places, where I stayed may now be upgraded or demolished. The hills may or may not be as steep as described, but it sure felt like it at the time.

## **Insurance**

A travel insurance policy is necessary to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies specifically exclude "dangerous activities", including scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. I don't think cycling is considered dangerous but check the small print.

## **Clothing**

We spent most days in the saddle, so ensure you have good quality, padded cycling shorts. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but one can cycle in any comfortable footwear. The southern part of China is hot in summer but cold in winter; pack accordingly. Personal toiletries should include insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I recommend using a cycling helmet.

## **The bicycle**

Any bicycle will do as long you are comfortable. I use an ordinary mountain bike with a Merida frame fitted with Shimano Deore bike parts, Alex wheel rims and Schwalbe tyres. The bicycle is equipped with Tubus bicycle racks. Panniers are expensive but essential items, and Ortlieb panniers are world-renowned. Make sure that you know how to fix a punctured tube. A phone holder for the handlebar is handy for navigation as I use Maps.ME or Google Maps to find my way. Furthermore, a handlebar bag is essential for holding a camera and other items needed during the day.

## **Recommended further reading**

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.







# About China

(Please refer to the Internet for a more in-depth overview)

## Capital City

The capital city of China is Beijing. Provincial-level administrative divisions or provinces are the highest Chinese administrative divisions, with 34 such divisions in China. However, this book only deals with four: Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan and Guangxi. The capital of Fujian is Fuzhou, Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong, Haikou is the capital of Hainan, and Nanning is the capital city of the province of Guangxi.

## Currency

The currency in China is the Chinese yuan (CNY), also known as Renminbi or Ren Min Bi. The currency code for Renminbi is RMB, and the currency symbol is ¥.

## Language

The official dialect of China is Mandarin, but there are more than 297 languages, of which Cantonese, Humanise, Min, Gan, Wu, and Hakka are the major dialects.

## Religion

There are many religions in China, including Buddhism, Chinese folklore, Taoism and Confucianism.

## Location and size

China is one of the countries considered to be situated in the Far East, located along the South and East China Sea. It's also the world's third largest country, after Russia and Canada, with an area of 9.6 million square kilometres and a coastline of 18,000 kilometres.

China is bordered by 14 countries - Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Russia. Marine-side neighbours include eight countries -- North Korea, Korea, Japan, Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

## Population

China, with over 1,408,500 billion people, is, without a doubt, the most populous country in the world. According to the census at the end of 2010, the ratio of the sexes is about 51.27% male and 48.73% female. Some 49.68% of the population resides in urban cities and towns, while the rest is in rural areas.

## Internet coverage

Internet services are widely available, particularly in town areas. Most travellers planning to stay in China for extended periods usually buy a local SIM card. These can be purchased at service booths, supplier shops, and phone stores on almost every street corner.

Even though the Internet is available throughout China, not all Internet is open to tourists. For example, many internet cafes only accept customers with Chinese IDs.

The easiest way to access Western websites, such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter, is by installing a Virtual Private Network, or VPN. A VPN can access restricted websites in China by shielding your browser activity. Unfortunately, VPNs are hard to find within the country, so make sure you buy and install a VPN before you arrive in China. Also, it would help if you opted for a paid service rather than a free one, as the Great Firewall can easily block free ones.







## About the Author

Born and bred in Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. However, her love for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique, a race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and had no idea what she was letting herself in for. To her surprise, she cycled every inch of the way to Cape Town. On her return, she found it surprisingly challenging to return to regular life and decided to continue travelling by bicycle.

Leana left Cape Town at the end of March 2007, accompanied by Ernest Markwood. What was intended as a long bike ride became an around-the-world cycle ride. In the beginning, they cycled together most of the time. Eventually, each found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

In the process, Leana has cycled Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe (including the UK), Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia and Australia. From Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina and spent the next few years cycling South, Central and North America. Afterwards, a year was spent visiting the larger islands including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan.

At the time of writing, Leana found herself back in Southeast Asia.















