

In China, a fantasyland where theme parks rule

By Judith Ritter
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SHENZHEN, China — Talk to someone just back from China and you're bound to hear about the magnificence of the Three Gorges, a personal moment of reflection in Tiananmen Square, or a seminar on the complexities of Chinese opera. Heady stuff.

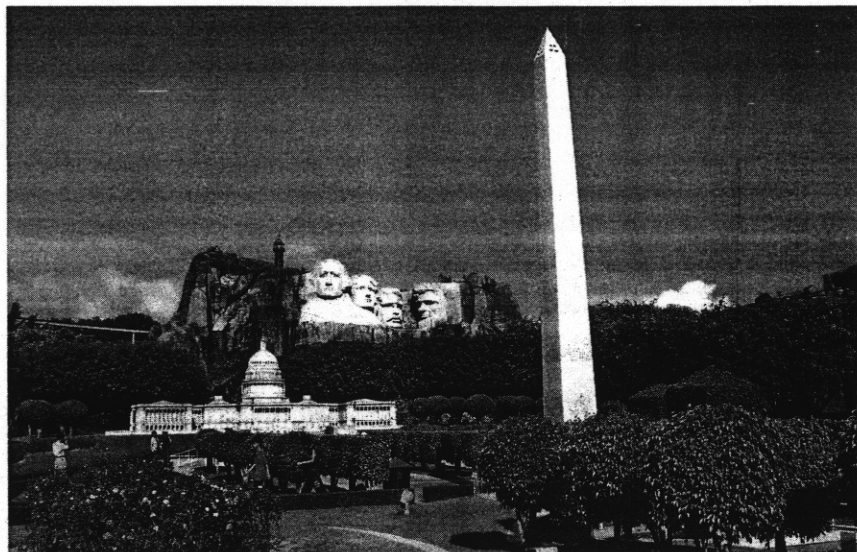
Not us. We went to China for the theme parks, seven all in one place. Shenzhen, just a 45-minute commute from Hong Kong, is one of the late Deng Xiaoping's "Special Economic Zones," where experiments in free-market economy take place. Some municipal visionaries in Shenzhen apparently have eschewed steel mills and battery factories for a quirkier side of capitalism, so that the city now has more theme parks than any single location in the world.

That's almost the least of the superlatives: The collection of parks also must be the wackiest, most surreal, most fun, and most exhausting.

The seven big parks and several satellites range from Minsk World, organized around the much cherished, retired, 40,000-ton Soviet aircraft carrier by that name (with rocket launchers), to Splendid China, which promises "all of China in a day." Visitors can hike in, through, and around shrunken versions of 80 giant scale models of main attractions like the mini-mausoleum of Genghis Khan, a must-see.

Splendid China was the brainchild of a lone bureaucrat, Ma Zhimin, now considered a "hero" of reform. Since most Chinese had no opportunity to travel, he reasoned — and thinking, perhaps, of the mountain and Mohammed — why not bring the Great Wall and the rest of China's landmarks closer to them? The exhibits are anywhere from one-third to one-fifteenth of actual size. The half-mile Great Wall is perhaps a little less "great" at one-sixth the size. Along with the mini-wall are pint-size versions of China's grand pagodas, palaces, monasteries, temples, and towers. Added to the tableau: impromptu performances by full-size men dressed as ancient archers or Mongolian wrestlers. Later at night, there's a Las Vegas-style extravaganza with 500 singers and dancers compressing 5,000 years of Chinese culture into a 40-minute show.

After Splendid China's success, which prompted a Florida Splendid China near Orlando, world history specialists fanned out over the planet, to Paris, Nairobi, Agra, and Niagara Falls looking for attractions for a new park. The result is Window of the World, beautifully landscaped with scale reproductions of the world's most



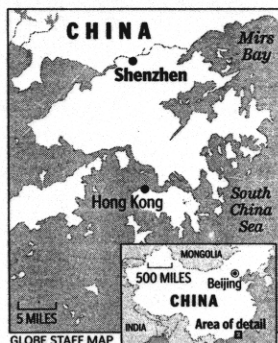
A mini Washington Monument towers over the White House in Window of the World park.

famous sights, such as the Arc de Triomphe, Piazza San Marco (without the pigeons or the nearby cappuccino), and Hawaiian volcanoes with scheduled eruptions.

The park is divided into continents, so of course we were most eager to find "Area of America" and see just how our country was represented. As the brochure advised, we "rejoiced with the whole world" and began our trek to the good old USA. On our way, we passed the Parthenon and the Eiffel Tower. The proximity of France and Greece was a bit disorienting, but not as much as a peculiar reversal on the size theme, the sight of a row of two-story-high beer bottles. Each bottle spouted water out of its top in honor of a cultural celebration we had never before heard of, the world beer festival.

Still on the road to America, we passed Mount Fuji and the Vatican, but we were stopped in our tracks by a playhouse-size Taj Mahal in marble. An Indian family took a break on a nearby bench in a state of heat exhaustion. We wondered what they thought of their country's mini world wonder. They scored it as "a good imitation, but short on the real diamonds." From the tiny Taj, we heard laughter coming from the pyramids just down the road. There, in front of Pharaoh's wonders, were a camel and a costume rental kiosk where visitors could choose from a rack of Thai, Egyptian, Indian, or Chinese garb and have a photo taken on the dusty animal.

Around the next bend, we came face-to-face with America-land, where the Grand Canyon bleeds into the Potomac and all around were our most breathtaking monuments at one-fifteenth



the size of the originals. Mount Rushmore, the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, and a darling unguarded White House sat in a cluster that merged North Dakota with the District of Columbia and, off to the left, the island of Manhattan, with all of its buildings on a little Hudson River. In this New York, the twin towers still stood. For us, taken aback, it was a miniature memorial. Our hosts, 10,000 miles from New York City, hadn't felt the need to change it, or even make note.

Fading in the 110-degree heat, we were reluctant to head out to Happy Valley park despite an official promise we'd "enter into another time and space and experience the total happiness." Our guide's insistent enthusiasm won us over. This amusement park is clearly the most favored by the Shenzhen city officials, but the bumper cars, space shot, and roller coaster, though thrilling "firsts" for China, are old hat for jaded North Americans.

If you go to Happy Valley, don't miss Happywood Studio and its live performance of "Total Warfare," a kung-fu comedy about

something called the Anti-Japanese War (which we later figured out was World War II). Along with actors, volunteers from the audience get to dress up as Japanese and Chinese soldiers and villagers. They then run about the stage firing guns with blanks through a lot of theatrical smoke, attacking and repelling enemies. It didn't matter that the narration was in Mandarin. Pratfalls and pyrotechnics told the tale.

Though it's a haul by taxi to Minsk World, the military park whose centerpiece is the retired carrier, it's worth the trip. This park is hugely popular with Chinese tourists, because, our guide explained, "China has no aircraft carrier of its own, and Chinese people dream to have one." Looking around, the American tourists and their dreams were elsewhere.

To the tune of recorded martial music, which could only have been by the Red Army marching band, our guide led us up on the deck, where Chinese tourists were romping around MIG fighter planes and helicopters. Other young guides, dressed spiffily in Soviet-style navy uniforms, obligingly assisted visitors into the gunner seats of the aircraft, and then posed for photos with rocket launchers and warheads. For those who remember the Cold War, all this enemy hardware was a bit disconcerting.

Endless gray corridors in the neon-lighted belly of the ship are lined with photos of heroes of the Soviet fleet. The photos are so popular that they are available as postcards at the souvenir kiosks. Farther on, a crowd gathered around another hero, a live Lenin look-alike posing for snapshots. The line was long, but we couldn't re-

If you go...

How to get there

Lowest upcoming round-trip fares from Boston to Hong Kong available at press time were \$687 on United Airlines, connecting through San Francisco. To get to Shenzhen from Hong Kong, take the KCR train from Kowloon Station to the last stop, Lo Wu. Outside the station, walk across a short bridge to cross the border into Shenzhen. From Shenzhen, take a taxi to any of the theme parks.

What to do

China Travel Service

CTS House, 78-83 Connaught Road, Central Hong Kong
Fax: 011-852-2854-1383

This tour operator can help you organize a theme-park visit; \$92 a day, or \$217 for two days.

Splendid China and Window of the World

Overseas Chinese Town, Shenzhen Bay
www.szwwco.com

Splendid China: admission, \$7.80, hours 8 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Window of the World: admission, \$14.60, hours 9 a.m.-10:30 p.m.

Minsk World

Seashore, Satujiao, Yantain District
011-86-755-535-5333 or
011-86-755-525-1427
www.minskworld.com
Admission \$13.30. Hours 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

Where to stay

Kowloon

The Intercontinental Hotel

18 Salisbury Road, Hong Kong
011-852-2721-1211
www.interconti.com

Formerly The Regent, with the best views of the harbor and a fabulous newly renovated spa specializing in Chinese herbal treatments. Rates: \$398-\$5500, double occupancy.
Salisbury YMCA
41 Salisbury Road, Hong Kong

www.ymcahk.org.hk
011-852-2736-0922

Book this one early. Superbly located on the tip of the Kowloon Peninsula and next door to the historic Peninsula Hotel. Rooms \$82-\$182.

Crowne Plaza Shenzhen

9026 Shennan Road
Overseas Chinese Town, Shenzhen
011-86-755-2693-6888

www.crowneplaza.com

Located close to theme parks, the hotel is a bit of a theme park itself. The entire hotel is decorated à la Venice, with a canal alongside. The hotel also has Cafe Zentro, a good Italian-side walk cafe with an international buffet. Rooms \$109-\$438.

Where to eat

Tang Court, Great Eagle Hotel

8 Peking Road, Hong Kong
011-852-2375-1133
www.gehotel.com

Named one of the 10 best restaurants in the world by Hotels Magazine. Entrees \$25-\$100.

Sichuan Cuisine Da Ping Huo

49 Hollywood Road
Hilltop Plaza (basement)
Hong Kong

852-2559-1317
This is one of Hong Kong's "secret" restaurants, run by two artists and publicized only by word of mouth. Dinner is followed by a performance of Chinese opera by the owner's wife. Word has it reservations must be made two months in advance. Seatings at 6:30 and 9:30 p.m., Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. The set dinner for one person is \$32.

Kung Tak Lam

31 Yee Wo St.
Lok Sing Centre, Causeway Bay
Hong Kong

011-852-2890-3127
This Shanghai-style vegetarian restaurant is one of two by the same name. The owner, Mr. Liu, is full of health-food wisdom. Dishes \$7-\$10.

sist the Kodak moment, and "Lenin," a retired Russian language teacher, whispered to me as he smiled for the camera. "I am very popular — 2,000 photos a day, 5,000 if holiday." But his popularity was dwarfed by the crowd that gathered to see another famous figure: Strelka, the cosmo-dog, stuffed and mounted in a glass case.

We didn't have time for other attractions in Shenzhen, but there are plenty for theme park fans. China Folk Village has two dozen ethnic villages, populated not by actors but by members of individual ethnic groups, started in from the remotest parts of the country. The Honey Lake China Amusement Park has car racing and a mermaid trapeze act. The War Games Center "gives people in the

time of peace, the thrill of war" and Safari Park, described in the brochure as a "whole Grand Gathering of All Animals," is modestly rated as one of the wonders of the world.

The Shenzhen authorities are always thinking up new amusements for tourists. One on the horizon that we surely won't miss next time is a novel and surprisingly uncomplicated attraction, which evokes another Cold War pastime. Coming to Shenzhen soon: an authentic movie theater where "visitors can enjoy films inside their cars." They call it a drive-in.

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