

FAMILY MATTERS

The Budget Family Holiday

Discovering what really matters on a cheap(er) vacation

→ It was a week of firsts. It was the first time to China for my biggest big sister; and the first time traveling within China to a major Chinese holiday hangout during a major Chinese holiday. It was our first time to Hangzhou, and the first time our family travelled as four instead of three. It was also the first time we chose the train instead of the plane, and the first time too we eschewed our usual criteria for hotel selection and chose to try our luck with a budget chain.

My sister arrived on a Friday and we started dragging her around China early Saturday morning. Our choice was the train—and not the plane—for a number of reasons, not least of which was cost. But more importantly, I believe you have not seen China until you have seen its stations and trains, the clamor to get from there to where you are going. It's a spellbinding spectacle to observe, at once terrifying, dizzying and unsettling, a nightmare of movement, noise and bodies cast in perpetual motion. Everyone shouting into their mobile phones, which are either newer and much more expensive than yours, or museum pieces that you've long forgotten you used to own.

Until you have seen 20,000 people ostensibly waiting for a train, and playing out the most important story of the 21st century whilst doing so, you have not seen China. And you have not lived.

The train takes only five hours to cover

the 1,500 or so kilometers it is to Hangzhou from Beijing. We snacked, we talked and we marveled at traveling at more than 300 kilometers an hour, not once turning a corner that we could feel. China has had more high-speed railway miles than the rest of the world put together since 2012; they keep shooting arrows across the country at a frightening pace. Since we've been here, the journey time from Beijing to Shanghai has more than halved, making the cities doable in a day, much like the trip between London and Manchester. A long day, but still a day. This is pretty incredible when you compare their respective distances.

We used to have this rule: the cheapest, most centrally located hotel we could find with a pool. It made sense. We'd take our daughter, Big, to the swimming pool so she'd tire out and fall asleep in her stroller so that we could have dinner or a drink before being having to return to the hotel. Staying in a Chinese hotel with a small child is mostly like a hotel stay anywhere else: not bad and not good. They are places you are forced to stay while your child sleeps.

This time, we skipped the pool. The difference in money is small, but the difference in location is huge. For a hotel with a pool in

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the same location, we would be talking much more than the ¥250 we paid for our pad within walking distance of Hangzhou's famed West Lake, surrounded by green hills and dotted with pagodas, with boats paddled by aged men and women, their toothless smiles warm

and calculating at the same time.

We checked in. Big would be in a room with my sister, and Little with us. We had bought a travel cot for our adopted daughter Little, while Big was excited about staying with her auntie in what they called the "party" room. We nearly left home without a travel cot, which would have been a huge mistake. Never leave this behind, especially when staying in budget hotels. There was just enough space for the travel cot, but nothing else.

That first night, I came to contemplate the differences between cheap and expensive hotels. It's all about the carpets. In an expensive hotel, they're cleaned nearly as often as they're vacuumed. In budget hotels, they're vacuumed morning and night, but are made so that regular cleaning is not required. I realized this because, due to the lack of space in the room, and the inability of Little to go to sleep quickly (or quietly) with anyone in the room, I found myself stroking a blue- and white-striped carpet while drinking beer from a can in the corridor outside, waiting for my wife as she used the lobby facilities.

It sounds terrible, but wasn't that bad at all. Yes, we were drinking warm lager from a can in a corridor, but we talked. We spoke more about the stuff that matters in those few nights in a cheap hotel corridor, waiting for and listening to our daughters go to sleep, than we have ever spoken in our lovely home in the Beijing 'burbs. We had nothing else to do. No TV, lest we wake Little, and no other distractions. Just the two of us, drinking beer and staying up late. It was just like old times.



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