

## The Road to Earthquake City

Monday June 8th we took it a little easy, enjoying about 9 hours sleep. All we had planned for the next day was get to Dujiangyan, a mere 40 miles from Chengdu. Our desk clerk advised us to take a cab to Xinnanmen bus station. But we got there only to be told that the Dujiangyan buses leave from Chadianzi on the other side of town. This was a surprising mistake. Lots of visitors to Chengdu are interested in the earthquake and the anniversary of 5-12 was only a couple weeks earlier. So we lost 20 minutes and 16 yuan, but the intercity bus cost us just over \$2 apiece and got us there in about an hour. Our first destination the Jurassic Park Hot Spring Resort and dinosaur park, whose ad promised dozens of warm mineral pools and four star accommodation, for an off-season price of about USD 45. I'd printed out the name card for the hotel ahead of time, so even if Sichuan dialect proved a problem, I could still point and grunt. After a quick negotiation, with Mary's "bitchy Shanghai wife" act helping me cut the price, we got a cab to take us for 60 yuan. This sounded high, and most fares are metered, but I knew the hotel wasn't downtown. We zipped into the mountains on a brand-new expressway and whizzed through a series of tunnels: 2, 4, and 1 km respectively. The driver stopped on a bridge to let us photograph the spectacular valley below. This hotel started to seem a little inconvenient. Then the freeway ended at the mouth of an older tunnel guarded by a police roadblock. A sign toled us that this was the earthquake epicenter; only authorized vehicles passed this point. Where's the hotel already? As I pointed anxiously at the hotel card, the driver was completely at a loss. Apparently the street the hotel is on, Lanxiu, is also the name of the hamlet at the epicenter. I had him call the hotel number, which didn't work since we were so far out of town that we needed the area prefix. I was concerned we wind up losing some money to get to the hotel, but at least we were seeing something of the earthquake. The driver was nearly shouting a torrent of incomprehensible Sichuan-hua, but calmed down after I found a number on my phone in the SMS message confirming the hotel. I called them up and handed him my phone so he could get directions. Even with the address, he was upset, writing down "30 km", which was probably our total mileage. OK, OK, "yi bai kuai" (100 RMB, or USD 15) I said, and now he was smiling. We zipped back to town through the tunnels at 120 km/h with the air conditioner humming. I imagine the cops at the roadblock must see this sort of drama pretty often.

It was after three pm when we at last arrived at Jurassic Hot Springs, with its promised 40 outdoor pools with capacity for 1500, as well as restaurants, a dinosaur museum, and full spa facilities. What we found was a cluster of a dozen or so buildings with eight guest rooms apiece, a few more unoccupied buildings which each had meeting rooms, guest rooms, and (empty) hot tubs. I was reminded of American ski resort architecture, crumbling slightly after less than ten years. The main bathing facility ultimately delivered: pools at several different temperatures, salt and herbal soaking pits, and free tea and water served by smiling young folks in assorted uniforms. The cold swimming pool was empty but for about six inches, and the changing rooms were understaffed, but then again there were almost no hotel guests. As was the case in most of our interactions in China, everyone seemed eager to help, and those who had some English were even able to understand enough of my Chinese. Soaked, showered and changed, we went into town for dinner in the row of riverside open-air restaurants that are quaintly named the "Night time Beer Corridor". Cab fare, \$1, distance, 2.5 km. Dinner, picked with the waiter's help by pointing at fish tanks and at the plates of other diners, was the best meal I've ever ordered in China. Reading a menu remains nearly hopeless, as I know very few names for food items. We ended the day back at the hotel being chased out of the warm pools at closing time: 11:30 pm.

Tuesday June 9 was our day for exploring the Dujiangyan irrigation works. In 256 BC, local governor Li Bing designed a diversion for the Minjiang River so that flood waters would have an outlet and spare the local farms. History does not record who was affected by the diverted water, of course: those guys were the losers. We spent three hours walking through the park, admiring the earthworks and contemplating the damage to Erwang Temple, which will be closed for restoration for a good long while. A two mile walk over a pass and through the woods, brought us back to town for a perfect small lunch. I was ready to browse for massage possibilities, but Mary reminded me she wanted to see the Zipingpu dam. The dam, opened earlier this decade, is blamed by some for triggering the earthquake with the weight of its new reservoir. I had only a hazy notion of where it was, and thought maybe we'd seen it from the freeway bridge on that first cab ride. At the tourist center at the park gate, the sole English speaker suggested either a cab or a series of local buses. While we could have just tried to negotiate a cab by ourselves, having "Zipingpu" written in Chinese was extremely helpful, as my pronunciation tricks, imperfectly learned from ChinesePod MP3 lessons (see [www.chinesepod.com](http://www.chinesepod.com)) didn't seem to work too well here away from metro Chengdu. And even there, I somehow had great difficulty making the word for cold (leng3) understood when I ordered a beer. Once they brought ice cubes.

The first driver that we approached agreed to take us to the dam for about ten dollars. We set off up the hillside, through the outskirts of town and reached the dam in about fifteen minutes. Zipingpu Dam is a modern hydroelectric dam a couple hundred meters high and perhaps a mile long. It survived the quake, with only a few loose bricks and the stabilized hillsides on either side appeared undamaged. That's "appeared", of course; and there were obvious landslides visible a little ways up the reservoir. Like many recent Chinese buildings, the power station at the bottom looked prematurely old, as if it were designed from Russian plans in the 1950s. I was relieved to see it was basically an earth dam, like Aswan, as opposed to a thin high-tech concrete wall like the one that failed catastrophically in Italy in the 1960's. I bought a DVD of the disaster from a miserable tiny roadside stand, and we got back in the cab back to town. He took us past many collapsed and twisted buildings once we were back in Dujiangyan. Before he let us off, he gave us his number and offered to take us to Chengdu the next day for thirty dollars.

Back at the hotel we finally got our massages. I'd tried to negotiate on Mary's behalf by talking to the masseuse beforehand, but understanding was limited. Ultimately we were worked on side-by-side in one treatment room with me translating as needed. This was a fine solution to the language issue, and there was no anxiety for either of us. Massage in China is not the dreamy total letting-go of Esalen or Harbin Hot Springs, but a more casual mix of pleasure, pain, attempts at conversation, all to the tune of whatever someone has left playing on the nearest four foot TV. We had well over an hour of body and foot massage, much of it with two providers working on each of us. Next morning, we took our driver up on his offer. Our transit to Chengdu was one hour instead of four. The last day in Chengdu was the stuff of life but not of story: some shopping, walking around, another exquisite meal. Our waiter at dinner engaged us in conversation, with me and my fractured Chinese and only a word or two of English on his part. He was from Dujiangyan, and nodded in vigorous agreement when Mary said in English that some people thought the [new dam had caused the quake](#). See: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/01/scientists-build-case-that-zipingpu-dam-triggered-china%E2%80%99s-devastating-earthquake/> Another article on earthquake preparedness, in this case the devastating 1976 quake, can be seen here: [http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/1976\\_Tangshan\\_earthquake](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/1976_Tangshan_earthquake) .

We then went over to the Sheraton, of all places, for a Chinese variety show, featuring in no discernible order: a woman playing electric violin with a rock band backing her, an hunky acrobatic pop singer who chugged a 2-liter pitcher of beer while standing on his head, a man and woman doing a Sichuan style slapstick shrewish wife versus goofy husband, punctuated with acrobatic leaps and rolls like we'd seen at the Sichuan opera performance at Emei town. There was also some storytelling, and a pair of acrobats. It would have been a lot better if we could understand the storytelling part. We had three solid hours of entertainment, with a very appreciative audience, and, traveler's dream, no obvious foreign tourists to be seen. The evening was a fine climax to Sichuan; all that now remained was Beijing.