

Across China on Two Wheels

Mist, Mountains, and Megacities



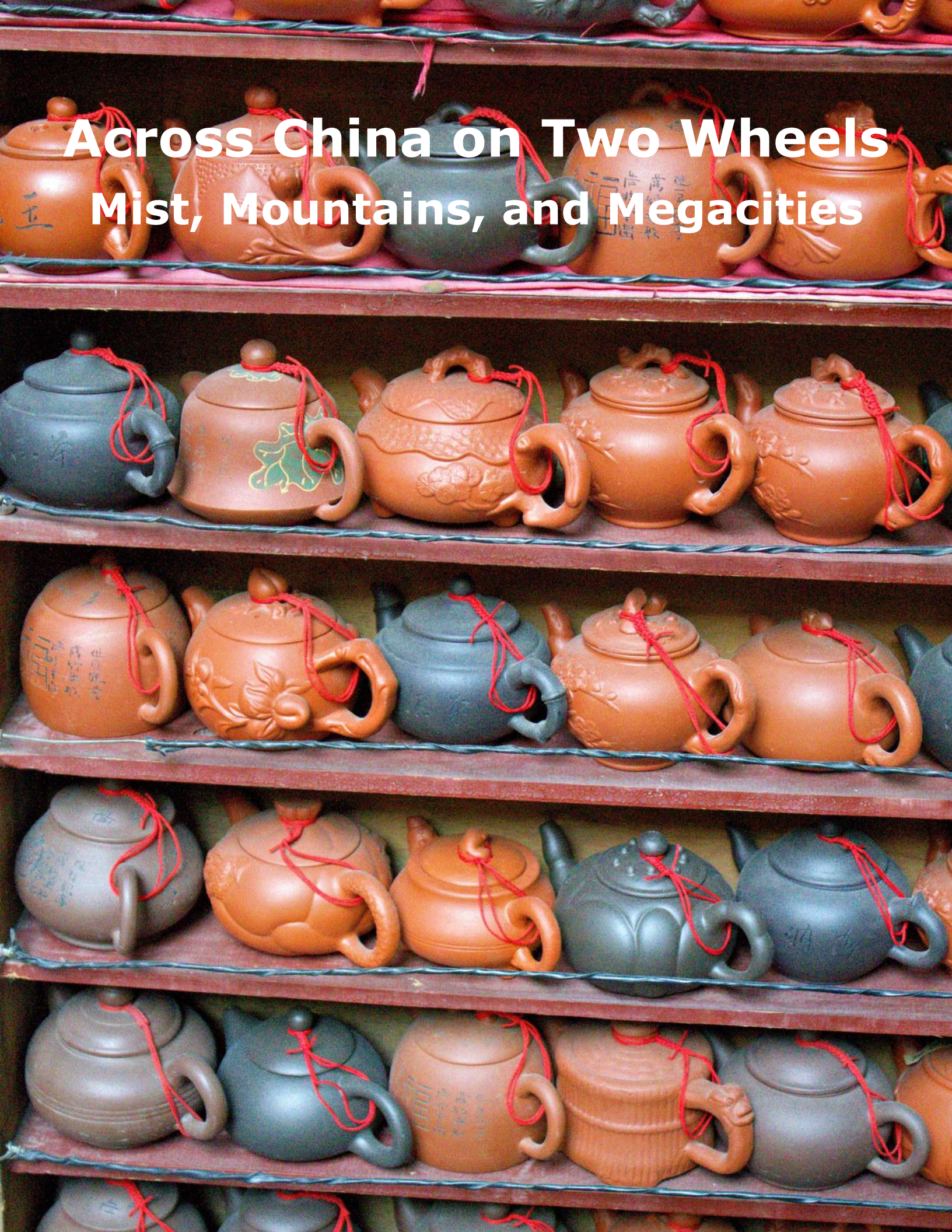
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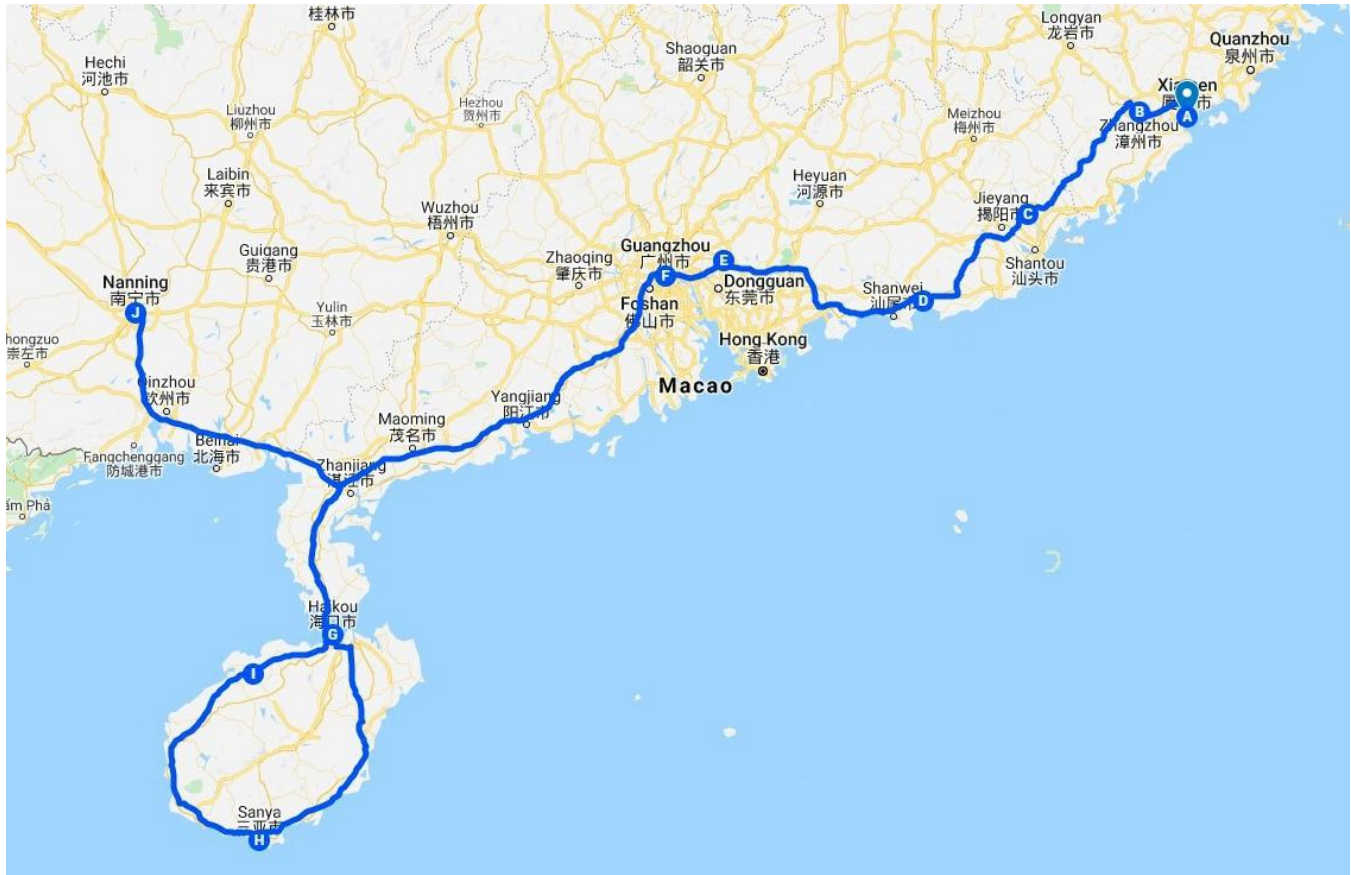
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Thank You

I am immensely grateful for the kindness of strangers and the random acts of generosity I encountered during my cycle tour of China. It was truly a humbling experience.

My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my journey.

I owe a great deal to my friend Val Abrahamse for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.

Lastly, a big shoutout to Gerda Van Der Sandt, who made my writing more coherent and patiently tolerated my use of the Oxford comma.



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Prelude

2,795 kilometres across China sounds impressive until you realise most of it was spent dodging firecrackers, navigating potholed mud baths, being stared at like a rare zoo exhibit, and trying not to lose essential items (usually hiding in my panniers). Still, those kilometres carried me from misty mountains to megacities, past ancient towers and modern chaos, and through a country that surprised me at every turn. China was never subtle, never quiet, and never predictable—but it was always unforgettable.



Taiwan to China: A Modest Little Ocean Crossing

The Cosco Star turned out to be far more substantial than the modest ferry I'd pictured. In fact, it was the sort of vessel that made you wonder whether you should have worn something more formal. The interior was surprisingly luxurious, with budget cabins containing six bunks each. I had all six to myself, which made me feel like a minor aristocrat—albeit one who spent the entire crossing lying flat because the ship rolled like a drunken elephant.

We arrived in Xiamen around 9:30 the next morning, and immigration was so painless I suspected I'd missed a step. I changed my last Taiwanese dollars, drew a few Chinese yuan, and stepped out eagerly to see what China had in store.

Xiamen, as it turned out, had a lot in store. The city was enormous—an ocean of high-rise buildings stretching in every direction—yet on the map it appeared as a polite little dot. It sat on an island connected to the mainland by a five-kilometre bridge, which the Chinese had built with the casual nonchalance of people who construct bridges the way others assemble IKEA shelves.

A ferry ran to the UNESCO-listed island of Gulangyu, only a few hundred metres away, but the queue was so long it looked like a pilgrimage. I abandoned that idea and headed to the nearest hostel instead.

Hard copies of anything—maps, guidebooks, even a scrap of paper with directions—were impossible to find. China had apparently leapfrogged straight into the digital age without leaving any printed breadcrumbs behind. So I finally bought a smartphone. I spent most of the day learning how to use it, which made me feel both technologically empowered and mildly defeated.







The Internet worked, but Facebook and other foreign platforms were blocked. Skype, however, was allowed, presumably because the government had decided it was too boring to pose a threat.

A walk downtown revealed a bustling, modern city with department stores on every corner and shops selling gadgets so advanced I wasn't entirely sure what they did. There was no trace of the extreme poverty of decades past. Everything was clean—surgically clean. Not a scrap of paper anywhere. I suspected that if I dropped a tissue, a municipal worker would abseil from a nearby building to retrieve it before it touched the ground.

China may have developed a coffee culture, but it remained a tea-drinking nation. Tea shops were everywhere, selling tiny teapots barely large enough to hold half a cup. I wasn't sure whether they were meant for brewing tea or for serving imaginary friends.

My hostel, BaiJaiCun, sat opposite Zhongshan Park, where elderly men played cards under enormous trees and families pedalled boats around the canal. It was a charming place to linger and watch China unfold.

The next day, I found pockets of “real China” hidden among the skyscrapers—people carrying goods in baskets suspended from bamboo poles, shopkeepers sipping tea from delicate china cups, and a market selling what looked suspiciously like bits of endangered species. I'm fairly sure I saw something resembling rhino horn. I decided not to ask.

The fish market was equally fascinating, offering every sea creature imaginable, including sandworm jelly—boiled worms set into a collagen-rich mould. I was told it was good for wrinkles. I decided to keep my wrinkles.







Xiamen to Zhangzhou: The Day China Tried to Break Me

I left late, assuming the ride to Zhangzhou would be short and easy. This was a mistake. Most roads prohibited bicycles, and finding alternative routes became a full-time occupation. I spent the day zigzagging across Fujian province like a confused ant.

By the time I reached Zhangzhou, it was dark, I was starving, and my patience had evaporated. I found a budget hotel in the centre, dumped my panniers, and dashed out for food. Back in my room, I curled up in front of the TV, vowing to buy a GPS before China swallowed me whole.





Zhangzhou to Yunxiao District: The Tunnel of Joy

Leaving Zhangzhou was easier, as the G324 allowed bicycles. In China, even the “small roads” had three lanes in each direction and were maintained better than most European highways. The gentle gradients made cycling a pleasure, and the weather was warm enough for a T-shirt and shorts.

It was Chinese New Year’s Eve, and celebrations were in full swing. I passed villages firing off endless strings of firecrackers, tea plantations, and tea houses. Thirty kilometres from Yunxian, a mountain loomed ahead—but the Chinese, being practical people, had simply dug a tunnel through it. I cycled through it grinning like a fool.

My hotel in Yunxian sat next to a park, which turned out to be a terrible idea. At midnight, the fireworks began—machine-gun-style rolls that exploded continuously for hours. The tradition is to make as much noise as possible to chase away evil spirits. Judging by the volume, they were chasing away all the spirits, including the good ones.



Yunxiao to Chaozhou: Mist, Mountains, and Rubber Necks

The morning mist hung low over the city, and the streets were carpeted in red paper from the night's firecrackers. Breakfast shops were closed, as the first day of the New Year was reserved for honouring elders.

The ride to Chaozhou was peaceful, with hazy mountains straight out of old Chinese paintings. People stared at me so intensely I feared someone might dislocate a neck. One man pulled up beside me to announce he had never seen a foreign woman cycling in China. I wasn't sure whether this made me a pioneer or a curiosity.

Finding accommodation in Chaozhou took nearly as long as cycling there. Everything affordable was booked, and the cheapest hotels accepted only Chinese citizens. Eventually, I gave up and booked a pricier room. The bed was so hard my hip went numb. I contemplated sleeping on my mat.





Chaozhou: Temples, Tea, and Being the Main Attraction

I found cheaper lodging in an alley the next morning. At the fancy hotel, the porter tried to help pack my bicycle but looked as though he'd been asked to saddle a unicorn.

Chaozhou was a historical gem, full of ancient temples and narrow lanes dating back to the Silk Route. The Guangji Bridge—originally a 12th-century pontoon bridge—was a highlight, along with the old city wall and gates.

Paifang Jie offered endless food options, including moon cakes, which everyone adored except me. I was relieved to discover that Western-style fortune cookies didn't exist in China. They're apparently a European invention.

China struck me as a land of contradictions: massive yet miniature, conservative yet modern, building skyscrapers while still transporting goods by bamboo pole. Even the one-child policy was more nuanced than expected. Many families had more than one child but only received benefits for one. Minority groups could have more, and government employees were restricted to one. I admired the idea that politicians were expected to lead by example—something the rest of the world might consider adopting.











Chaozhou: Opera, Tea, and the Art of Staying Curious

Chaozhou was touristy for good reason. Its opera, dating back over 500 years, featured clowns, acrobatics, and elaborate costumes. I didn't see a performance, but I found a tiny shop making gowns and headdresses for the stage.

Gongfu tea—first drunk in the Song Dynasty—remained central to social life. Teahouses played soothing Chaozhou music with strings, gongs, and drums. It was the perfect soundtrack for watching the world go by.





Chaozhou to Cheonan District: The Great G324 Commitment Ceremony

The weather continued its suspiciously pleasant behaviour. Either winter had ended early, or China was simply showing off, but I wasn't complaining. I stuck to the G324, which had become my dependable—if not scenic—companion. It ran through endless built-up areas, the sort of places where you could buy a smartphone, a dumpling, and a chandelier within ten metres.

I attempted one alternative route, which promptly sent me around in circles like a confused pigeon. I returned to the G324, deciding that until I acquired a GPS, I should stop pretending I had a natural sense of direction.

China's development remained mind-boggling, but every now and then, "Old China" peeked through—pedicabs ferrying people for pocket change, markets selling vegetables so crisp they practically snapped when you looked at them, and food vendors producing dishes so delicious it was best not to ask what was inside.

The 7 Days Inn impressed with its shiny finishes, but the Wi-Fi died after I uploaded a single photo. It was as if the connection had decided, "That's enough Internet for you today."



Cheonan to Lufeng: Fog, Friendship, and Spring Rolls

The first part of the ride that day ran through more built-up areas, and the countryside wasn't much better. Fog hung so low I felt like I was cycling through a damp cotton ball.

The Chinese were wonderfully friendly, and anyone with a hint of English stopped to chat. A man on a scooter pulled up beside me, and after a cheerful exchange, he led me to a bookshop to find a map of Guangdong Province—then insisted on paying for it. I was beginning to suspect China was trying to rehabilitate its reputation by overwhelming visitors with kindness.

I checked into a modest-looking place in Lufeng, where even the budget rooms came with a complimentary sealed comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, and shower cap. China clearly believed in grooming.

It was the fifth day of the Lunar Festival, officially the end of winter and the first day of spring. Tradition dictated eating spring rolls, avoiding brooms and scissors, and setting off firecrackers to scare away poverty. Judging by the noise, poverty didn't stand a chance.

The news reported that 108 million people had travelled by train during the first week of the holidays. I was delighted to be in a very un-touristy part of China, where the only crowds were the ones staring at me.



Lufeng to Huidong: Strawberries, Chaos, and the Ghost of Poverty

I woke to drizzle, but it wasn't cold, and a tailwind pushed me along like a benevolent hand. By midday, I'd shed the rain jacket, and the day had turned pleasant.

The route passed vast strawberry fields where one could pick their own. I didn't, but I did stop to take photos, mostly to prove to myself later that I hadn't hallucinated them.

Traffic was chaotic. Vehicles drove on whichever side of the road suited them, turned without warning, and hooted randomly. The hooting seemed to serve no purpose other than reminding everyone that the horn existed.

It was the sixth day of the New Year, dedicated to sending away the ghost of poverty. People discarded old clothes, lit candles at roadside shrines, and generally behaved as though poverty were a timid creature easily frightened by clutter and candlelight.

At the first hotel in Huidong, the receptionist ignored me completely. The Chinese had perfected the art of pretending unwanted situations didn't exist. It worked—I went next door.

The second hotel's staff became so flustered by my written Mandarin request for a single room that they couldn't even read their own language. Fortunately, ordering food was easier: you simply pointed at what you wanted and hoped for the best.



Huidong to Zengcheng: Nüwa, Silence, and Feng Shui on Steroids

According to legend, Nüwa created the world—and on the seventh day, she created humans from yellow clay. (I've always suspected God was a woman.) The seventh day of the New Year celebrates this event, and judging by the empty roads, everyone was at home honouring their clay origins.

Anyone who spoke English asked why I was travelling alone. I learned that for the average Chinese person, travelling solo in a foreign country was the most terrifying thing imaginable. I felt oddly proud of myself.

China's development was dizzying, but water features softened the edges. My hotel had a massive fountain at the entrance, because feng shui dictates that water in front and mountains behind bring prosperity. As a result, most hotels looked like they were auditioning for a role in a koi-pond documentary.

Zengcheng to Guangzhou: The Pearl River Jackpot

Leaving Zengcheng, I passed a large, impressive park that made the concrete jungle seem almost polite. New developments included wide pavements, parks, and separate bicycle lanes—proof that China could build megacities without forgetting humans existed.

The route west rolled over hills and past rural settlements until Guangzhou appeared. Historically known as Canton, it was the capital of Guangdong province and home to 19 million people. It took forever to reach the hostel, but I clung to the Inner Ring Road like a barnacle, hoping it would eventually deliver me somewhere useful.



At the crucial intersection, I discovered there was no bridge—only a ferry. For one yuan, it carried me and my bicycle across the river and deposited me directly at the hostel door. I felt as though the city had personally welcomed me.

The hostel overlooked the Pearl River, China's third-longest at over 2,000 kilometres. As I unpacked, the weather turned foul. Overnight, I went from shorts and a T-shirt to a bundled-up Arctic explorer. The cold front brought freezing temperatures, howling wind, and torrential rain. I watched it all from under a fluffy duvet, feeling smug.

With time to spare, I ordered a Garmin GPS. Delivery was a mystery, but the weather was dreadful, so waiting wasn't a hardship.

A break in the rain allowed me to explore Guangzhou, a city of contradictions—old yet modern, frantic yet peaceful. With most people still home for the holidays, the streets were blissfully quiet.

Temples appeared everywhere, despite China's reputation as an atheist nation. Roughly 30% of adults followed Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Islamic, or other beliefs, and the remaining 70% considered themselves atheists. That 30% must have been very active.

I wandered through narrow lanes revealing dusty workshops where coppersmiths hammered away, oblivious to me. Antique shops displayed exquisite ceramics and jade carvings, and colonial buildings stood left behind by the British and French in the 19th century.







Guangzhou: Bruce Lee, Ivory, and Granite Grandeur

My wanderings brought me to the humble house of the Father of Chinese Railways down a pedestrian lane. Nearby was the union for actors in Cantonese opera, and next door stood the ancestral home of Bruce Lee—unsurprising, as his father had been a Cantonese opera actor.

One temple displayed ivory carvings of astonishing detail. Politically incorrect, yes, but undeniably beautiful. China had recently destroyed more than six tons of illegal ivory, and legal pieces required certificates of provenance.

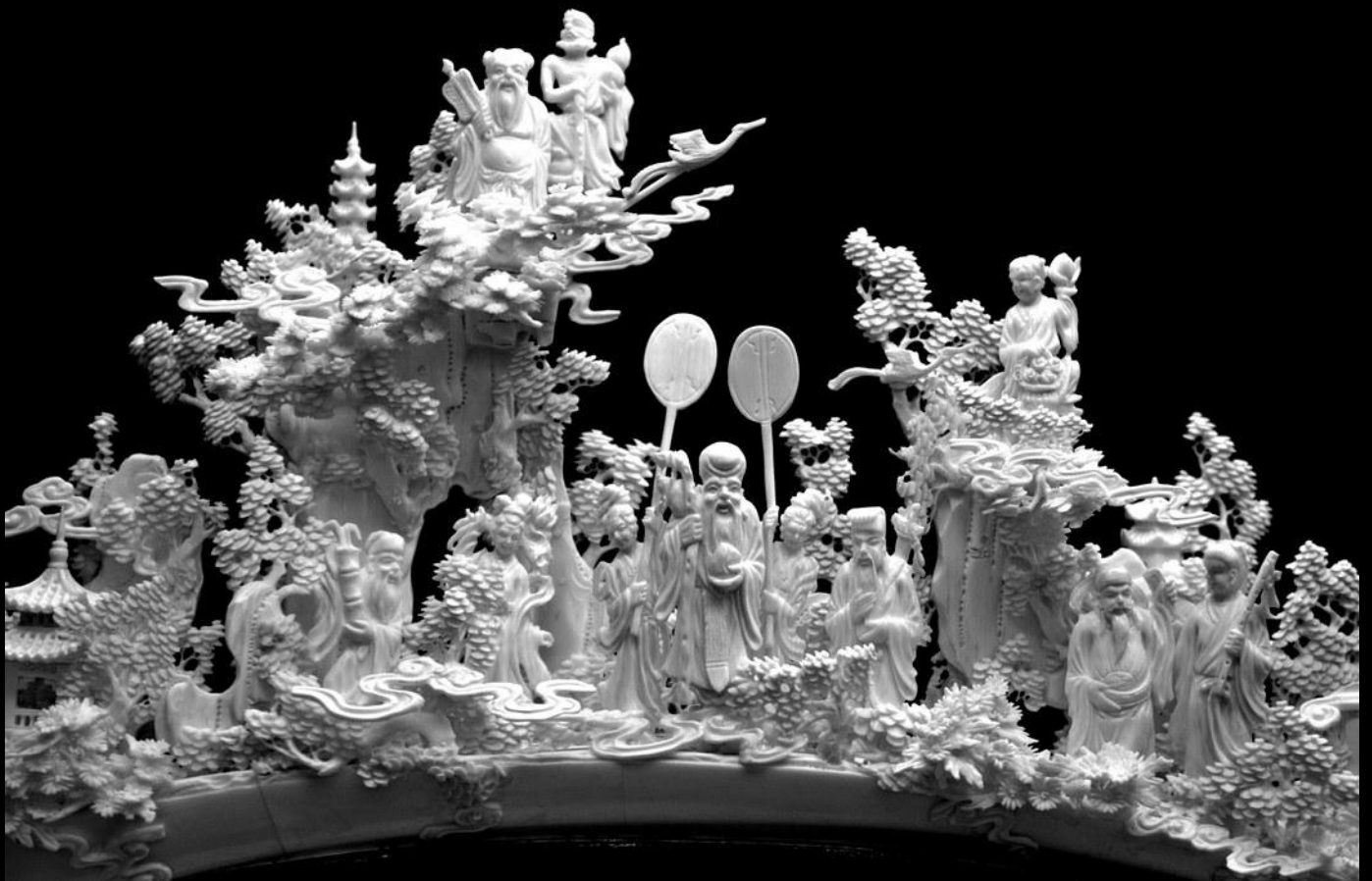
The Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, built entirely of granite by the French after the Second Opium War, featured two towers each 48 metres high. It looked as if giants had carved it with a fondness for symmetry.

Shopping remained challenging. I already stood out like a sore thumb, and taking photos only made me more conspicuous. Eventually, people seemed to decide that anything I did—acceptable or not—was simply because I was foreign.

The temperature dropped to seven degrees, and the hostel offered no heating. It resembled a walk-in fridge. I burrowed into my sleeping bag and reconsidered my life choices.







Guangzhou: The Garmin Gamble

Nothing came of the Garmin order, so I took a taxi to a massive electronics centre. If you couldn't find something there, it probably didn't exist.

The Garmin stand didn't have the model I wanted, so I bought a pricier one with features I would likely never use. The owner kindly installed an English China map, and I spent the evening fiddling with my new toy, doubting whether it was worth the investment.

Guangzhou to Jun'anzen: The Garmin Honeymoon Phase

I was like a child with a new toy—one of those children who wake up at 4 a.m. on Christmas morning and shake the entire household awake. I couldn't wait to strap the Garmin onto the bike and see whether it would lead me to glory or into a ditch.

I didn't fully trust it, so I checked the map every few kilometres, just in case it decided to send me to Mongolia. But it worked beautifully, guiding me straight to Jun'anzen, where a hotel awaited. I spent the evening downloading the day's route, marvelling at the magical little device. Small things really do amuse small minds.



Jun'anzen to Chikan (Kaiping): Towers, Canals, and Time Travel

With the Garmin clipped in, I pedalled into the countryside, discovering that Guangdong province was far more charming than its industrial reputation suggested. The route wound past ancient-looking hamlets and along peaceful canals until I reached Kaiping.

Kaiping's landscape was dotted with fortified multi-storey towers—*diaolou*—built in the 1920s and 30s to protect families from bandits. They weren't ancient, but they had the sort of architectural swagger that made you stop and stare. About 1,833 of them still stood, scattered across the countryside like misplaced chess pieces. Twenty of the most symbolic ones had earned UNESCO World Heritage status.

I planned to explore them properly the next day.

Around Kaiping: Zili Village and the Ghosts of History

Bundled up against the bitter cold, I cycled to Zili Village, where many of the towers clustered together like a family reunion.

The story behind them was sobering. In the mid-19th century, after slavery was outlawed in most Western countries, recruiters promised Chinese labourers good pay and conditions abroad. Instead, they were forced into brutal labour; millions left, many died, and only a few returned wealthy. Those who did brought back money and foreign ideas built these towers to protect their families from bandits, floods, and Japanese troops.

The towers stood quietly in the mist, looking both proud and slightly haunted.







Chikan to Yangjiang: Fog, Bruce Springsteen, and Forward Momentum

The fog was thick enough to make everything look like a watercolour painting left out in the rain. Visibility was poor, but the breeze was at my back, and nothing much happened. A few towers appeared in the distance, but mostly it was just me, the road, and my iPod.

With “Brucey” blaring in my ears, I pedalled the 100 kilometres to Yangjiang, feeling like the world’s least glamorous rock star.

Yangjiang to Dianbai District: Fog, Drizzle, and the Lure of Hainan

I again woke to morning fog, so I attached a flashing light, donned my bright yellow rain jacket, and pointed myself west toward Hainan, where the climate was rumoured to be milder. It began drizzling, and although it wasn’t cold, I decided Dianbai was far enough for the day.



Dianbai to Zhanjiang: Mist, Gadgets, and Laundry Diplomacy

The next day the ride to Zhanjiang was easy, though still misty with light rain. With little scenery to distract me, I played with my electronic toys—none of which were particularly helpful. The fancy Garmin still hadn't found me a meaningful route, and Google Maps was doing most of the heavy lifting.

After 120 kilometres, I reached a bridge where bicycles were forbidden. Fortunately, the Garmin pointed me to a ferry port, where bikes and motorbikes were shuttled across what I later discovered was not a river but an inlet of the South China Sea.

I checked into a cheapish hotel and immediately realised I needed to do laundry. Unable to find a laundromat, I began washing clothes myself, but the hotel staff intervened and whisked everything away. When it would return was anyone's guess.

Shopping took twice as long as anywhere else, and I spent nearly the entire day finding a few basic items. My hotel sat opposite a market, but convinced the food contained dog meat, I skipped supper. (It may have been my imagination, but once the idea enters your head, it's hard to shake.)



Zhanjiang to Leizhou: The Phantom Ferry

My laundry miraculously reappeared in time for departure. The Internet insisted there was a ferry from Zhanjiang to Hainan, so I searched for the jetty. There was no sign of it. Perhaps it had never existed.

A minor road ran further south toward Hainan, but I was already late and didn't want to arrive on the island after dark. I settled for a night in Leizhou.

Leizhou to Haikou (Hainan Island): The Foreign Woman Circus

I hadn't seen a Westerner in a month, so the stares were constant. I was different from the Chinese in every conceivable way, and the fact that I was travelling alone seemed to baffle them. They didn't say it, but their eyes suggested they felt sorry for me.

Scooter riders nearly caused accidents as they swung around to look. Drivers slowed down and held up their toddlers so they could see the foreign woman. Stopping for a drink felt like a circus performance. Some people approached; others retreated. A little boy stared at me, whispered "WOW," and stepped back as though I might explode.

After weeks without speaking to anyone, I feared losing my voice. With my iPod blaring, I sang at the top of my lungs—"Cocaine," "I Shot the Sheriff"—and pedalled over the hills like a deranged karaoke cyclist. I got strange looks, but I threw in a cheerful "Ni-hao" and kept singing. Entirely sober, too.



Haikou: Bureaucracy and Dumplings

In Haikou, I checked into the Banana Hostel and braced myself for the dreaded visa extension. The next morning, I located the Public Security Bureau easily, but the counter was closed. I needed a letter from the hostel, so I fetched it and returned. After filling out forms, taking photos, and getting fingerprinted, I was told to collect the visa in four days.

Haikou's old quarter kept me busy—antique shops, crooked alleys, and endless opportunities to play with my macro lens. The smell of dumplings and barbecues drifted through the streets, and old men played board games with cigarettes dangling from their lips.

Four days passed quickly, and I collected my visa, ready to continue south.

Haikou to Wenchang: Dust, High-Rises, and a Relentless Breeze

Hainan was popular among young cyclists, and I encountered many college kids en route to Wenchang. Unfortunately, the ride was unimpressive. Even the beach was dreadful—high-rises, dust, and construction everywhere. A stiff breeze battled me all day.







Wenchang to Bo'ao: Shrines, Fish Farms, and a Well-Earned Beer

The next day was far more pleasant. I passed small villages, farmlands ready for harvest, and fish farms operating at full tilt. Shrines lined the road, incense curling into the air.

Bo'ao offered a cheap room, dumplings, and beer—everything a weary cyclist could want.

Bo'ao: The Great GoPro Mystery

Twenty-five kilometres beyond Bo'ao, I realised my GoPro was missing. Convinced I'd left it at the hotel, I cycled all the way back. Of course, it wasn't there. I stayed the night anyway, only to discover the camera buried in one of my panniers.

A stroll led me to a colourful temple on the beach, full of deities dramatic enough to frighten anyone into good behaviour. Nearby, I found a delightful coffee shop in a traditional stone house, with a leafy garden, wooden tables, antiques, and arty bits everywhere. Best of all, they served coffee in real china.







Bo'ao to Xinglong: Hot Springs, Overdevelopment, and a Hint of Illness

Cyclists were heading to Xinglong for its famous hot spring, so I followed. Not feeling great—something I ate, perhaps—I pushed on anyway. The cyclists I'd met earlier pointed me to budget accommodation.

Xinglong was overdeveloped and touristy, and I didn't bother searching for the hot spring. I could imagine exactly what it would look like. Instead, nursing a budding knee problem, I spent the evening indoors.





Xinglong to Sanya: Knees, Russians, and Tropical Lazing

There wasn't much to be done about the knee except hope it behaved. Oddly enough, it was perfect while cycling—only complaining when I stopped, which felt like a betrayal. The map promised hills, but I pedalled over them without incident, passing rural hamlets and farmlands until big, lively Sanya appeared with its 20-kilometre stretch of beach.

I headed straight for Dadong Hai, where the map claimed a hostel existed. It did—Backpacker Hostel—tucked behind high-rises and right in the middle of the action. A real haven.

The next day I did almost nothing, drifting between the beach and nearby food stalls. The dominant languages were Chinese and Russian, which made me feel like I'd accidentally cycled into a Cold War summit. With year-round sunshine and temperatures around 25°C even in January, Sanya was immensely touristy. Pearls were sold everywhere, and although giant clams were endangered, their shells were sold everywhere too.

I stayed another day—Sanya had interesting people to talk to, and my knee still felt questionable. I bought a knee guard and rubbed on some Chinese lotion. The guard was clearly designed for slim Chinese legs, not my sturdy stompers, but I squeezed it on anyway.







Sanya to Huangliu: The 108-Metre Buddha and a Quick Escape

After taking photos with the hostel staff, I cycled west. Thirty-five kilometres later, a massive Buddhist temple complex appeared, swarming with tourists. The entrance fee was hefty, especially for something so artificial, but I joined the madness anyway.

At the centre stood a 108-metre-tall Buddha statue on a man-made island—larger than the Statue of Liberty. It was impressive, but the crowds were overwhelming, so I snapped a few pictures and escaped.

The rest of the day was blissfully normal—small hamlets, quiet roads, and a welcoming guesthouse with mobile food traders outside.





Huangliu to Changjiang: Rural Charm and Surprisingly Civilised Cities

The following day unfolded into a delightful ride through picturesque countryside dotted with traditional communities. Farmers guided ploughs through rich soil, and the scenery glowed golden as the sun dipped.

Changjiang appeared with accommodations conveniently lining the main road. The sprawling cities I'd seen from afar turned out to be surprisingly well-designed—wide roads, greenery everywhere, and dedicated lanes for cyclists and motorbikes. What looked intimidating from a distance became leisurely and enjoyable up close.





Changjiang to Jialai: Trees, Journalists, and Sun-Shocked Onlookers

I packed up and pointed the bike toward Haikou, meeting other cyclists and even a journalist who took photos and asked questions. The scenery was lush and green—too organised to be natural. I suspected a massive tree-planting project, and the authorities had beautified the road with dense, colourful plants.

Not expecting accommodation, I was surprised to find a small village offering 50-yuan rooms.

As usual, I crossed the road for takeaway food. Eating under intense scrutiny was uncomfortable. While waiting for noodles, bystanders stared without blinking, inspecting my feet, hair, and—most shocking of all—my bare arms, which had clearly been exposed to the sun. To them, horror.





Jialai to Haikou: A Pleasant Ride and a Familiar Bed

The weather was perfect—overcast but warm—and I set off to Haikou in high spirits. The route passed scenic hamlets where I bought lunch but carried it to Haikou to avoid the staring. The Banana Hostel became my home once more, and with that I completed my ride around the island of Hainan.

Haikou: Volcanoes, Lava Villages, and a Homemade Torch

Outside Haikou lay a volcano park. Not expecting much, I cycled there anyway. The last eruption was roughly 13,000 years ago, and one could hike to the crater rim overlooking the countryside. The rim revealed more craters—almost 36 in total.

Nearby Rongtang village was far more exciting: a historic lava-rock settlement built entirely from volcanic stone about 900 years ago. Mostly abandoned now, it still had a few elders living there. A 90-year-old lady, bent nearly in half, offered to show me the lava tunnels. We set off with her homemade torch—bamboo, cloth, and paraffin. The interconnected tunnels had been used as hiding places during the Japanese occupation. It was extraordinary.







Haikou: Hash House Harriers and Lens-Cover Hunting

I lingered at the hostel, doing very little. A crowd from the Hash House Harriers—mostly Australians—were in town for their annual gathering. They were a cheerful bunch.

Having lost a lens cover, I wandered downtown to find another. The stroll through the old quarters and city park was lovely. Parks were lush, full of water features, and perfect for watching people practise Tai Chi. Pavements were lined with hawkers selling colourful umbrellas, steaming corn-on-the-cob, and rice in banana leaves.

Haikou to Beihai (By Ferry): Celebrity Status and a Private Cabin

Cycling to the port, I met a German couple travelling with their four-year-old daughter in a trailer. She sat happily listening to stories while her parents pedalled up hills. I could barely get myself up hills, let alone pull a child.

Instead of backtracking 150 kilometres to Zhanjiang, I chose the ferry to Beihai. To my surprise, I was something of a celebrity. A few days earlier, a newspaper had run an article about my travels, and everyone seemed to know I was South African. They were astonished I'd sold all my possessions. My newfound fame earned me a private cabin. The ferry departed at 7 p.m.







Beihai: Lost Keys, German Cyclists, and Seafood Adventures

The ferry arrived on time, but I couldn't find my bike-lock key. In a cabin that small, losing anything felt like a personal failure. I had no choice but to cut the lock.

Outside, I met two German women travelling by bicycle. They'd started hitchhiking, bought bikes somewhere along the way, and had been travelling for a year and a half.

Beihai's old quarter was wonderful—historic streets, a bustling river, and a fishing harbour. Music drifted from an open doorway, and someone waved me inside to listen to a rehearsal.

Fog and howling wind kept me in town the next day. The market was colourful and fascinating. Seafood was slightly out of the ordinary—some creatures looked like bait—but oysters were cooked on coals and sprinkled with spices, not eaten raw “like barbarians.”

Chinese food was delicious, fresh, crisp, and flavourful. You could pick your seafood from a tank and have it cooked however you liked.







Beihai to Qinzhou: Fog Lifting, Fishing Hamlets, and a Two-Word Friendship

Leaving Beihai, the fog slowly lifted, revealing quaint fishing hamlets. To one side lay the ocean; to the other, an inlet with busy harbours. Eventually, the route veered inland through forestry plantations, sawmills, and woodworks.

At a traffic light, I stopped next to a lady on a tricycle. I said, “Ni-hao.” She said, “Hello.” We laughed, knowing those two words were our entire shared vocabulary. She continued in Chinese; I replied in English: “Yes, I am going to Nanning, and I am from South Africa.” Perhaps that’s what she asked. The light changed, and we waved goodbye like old friends.





Qinzhou to Nanning: Mud, Misery, and a Bee with Bad Timing

Shortly after leaving Qinzhou, the road deteriorated spectacularly. It veered inland over mountains, then turned into a muddy, potholed disaster zone. At one point, the mud was so thick I had to walk the bike, slipping and sliding like a drunk penguin.

Covered in mud, I battled onwards, wondering whether Nanning was even reachable. Then a bee stung me on the jaw, presumably deciding I needed one more challenge.

Halfway to Nanning, a restaurant kindly let me use their outside tap to spray down the bike. It helped for about ten minutes before the chain clogged again.

This continued until I was roughly 30 kilometres from Nanning. At around 18h00, I finally crawled into the city—filthy, exhausted, and starving—only to discover the hostel I'd planned on had closed. Give me strength. I booked the first hotel I saw.

The next morning, I cycled to the Green Forest Hostel. A private room cost nearly as much as the hotel, but I had a plan. Hostels meant people to talk to, and I needed to wash my mud-encrusted panniers (in the shower). It turned out to be Spring Day—a good day for spring cleaning.

The hostel arranged Vietnamese visas at no extra cost, and Vietnam was within striking distance. I handed in my passport and waited.



Nanning: Chopsticks, Clouds, and Night-Market Heaven

With time to kill, I wandered into town and found an outdoor store selling chopsticks and a spoon instead of the usual camping knife-fork-spoon set. Why this surprised me, I don't know.

Hostels are usually well located, and Green Forest was no exception—close to everything, especially the night market. The only downside was schlepping the bike and panniers up two flights of stairs because China counts floors differently.

I waited for the night market to open so I could get my beloved wonton soup. I learned that “wonton” literally translates to “swallowing a cloud,” which is exactly what it looks like—tiny dumplings floating dreamily in broth.





Nanning: Modern Marvels and Ancient Alleys

Determined to photograph modern Nanning, I headed down the pedestrian mall past endless designer stores. China's achievements were astounding—over **400 million** people lifted out of extreme poverty in 20 years, 14 years ahead of schedule. People love pointing out China's flaws, but that success is undeniable.

Behind McDonald's and Pizza Hut, I found narrow alleys full of old-world charm. Laundry hung across cobblestone lanes, red lanterns swayed, and people pushed building materials in three-wheeled carts. Sagging roofs, crooked windows, and mysterious doorways made far more interesting photos than the modern skyline.

Rounding a corner, I found a silversmith melting and pounding tiny pellets into jewellery. My excitement was disproportionate, but that's travel for you.

My passport returned with the Vietnamese visa, leaving only three blank pages. I needed an SA Embassy soon.

As the day wore on, I reconsidered Vietnam. I'd already cycled it, and going again would be a costly diversion. The weather up north was improving, and Shanghai beckoned.







Nanning to Tong'an (By Bus): The Great Change of Plans

Still unsure which direction to go, I visited the train station to ask about trains to Xiamen. Apparently, none existed—at least none they could explain in English. I suspect there was a train, but it probably involved a transfer, and explaining that was too much for everyone involved.

So I headed out of town in the direction of Vietnam. In the process, the road led past the bus station, and on impulse I asked about buses. By 14h30, I was on a sleeper bus to Xiamen. So much for indecision.

The bus had tiny individual beds—barely wide enough for me—but at least one could lie horizontally. It hardly stopped, except once around 20h00 for food.

Tong'an: Highway Abandonment and a Much-Needed Nap

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

My phone told me I was twenty kilometres outside Tong'an. Luckily, I didn't need to ask anyone where I was. Imagine that! Far too tired to cycle to the next town, I opted for the shorter 20-kilometre ride to a nearby hotel. With all my devices charged, I showered, ate something, and napped.



Tong'an to Quanzhou: Visa Gymnastics and Ancient Mosques

The ride to Quanzhou was effortless. The city was enormous, and it took ages to reach the old part.

My visa expired in three days, so I tried extending it. The officer wasn't in, so I returned the next day—only to be told that the branch didn't issue visas. They kindly drove me to the correct office.

There, I learned they couldn't extend an already extended visa. Quanzhou was notoriously difficult for visa extensions.

I could have tried another town, but time was up. My best option was Hong Kong.

I bought a bus ticket for the following night. With formalities done, I explored the area and found the Qingjing Mosque, built in 1009—the oldest in China.

Quanzhou: Low Gear and Temple Wandering

I drifted around town drinking coffee and visiting temples until it was time to board the sleeper bus. Thankfully, it had bunk beds, so one could lie down comfortably.



BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Quanzhou Kaiyuan Temple, built in 686 and covering an area of 78,000 m², is one of the national key-protected relics and the national key Buddhist temples as well as one of the 10 best scenic spots in Fujian. The Heavenly Guardian Hall, One-hundred-pillar Hall and the Sweet Dew Discipline Altar are seldom seen at home and abroad. Moreover, Zhangba Golden Statue, Buddhas of Five Directions, Musical-sound Celestial Ladies and Indian carvings are considered to be rare cultural relics. The twin pagodas called Zhen-guo and Renshou Tower, standing aloft separately at the eastern and western ends, are unique in the country. Besides, the mulberry tree (over 1,300 years old) is the oldest one in the world. Famous historic and cultural sites can be found here and there in the temple.



Quanzhou to Hong Kong: Illegal Cycling and Rugby-7s Chaos

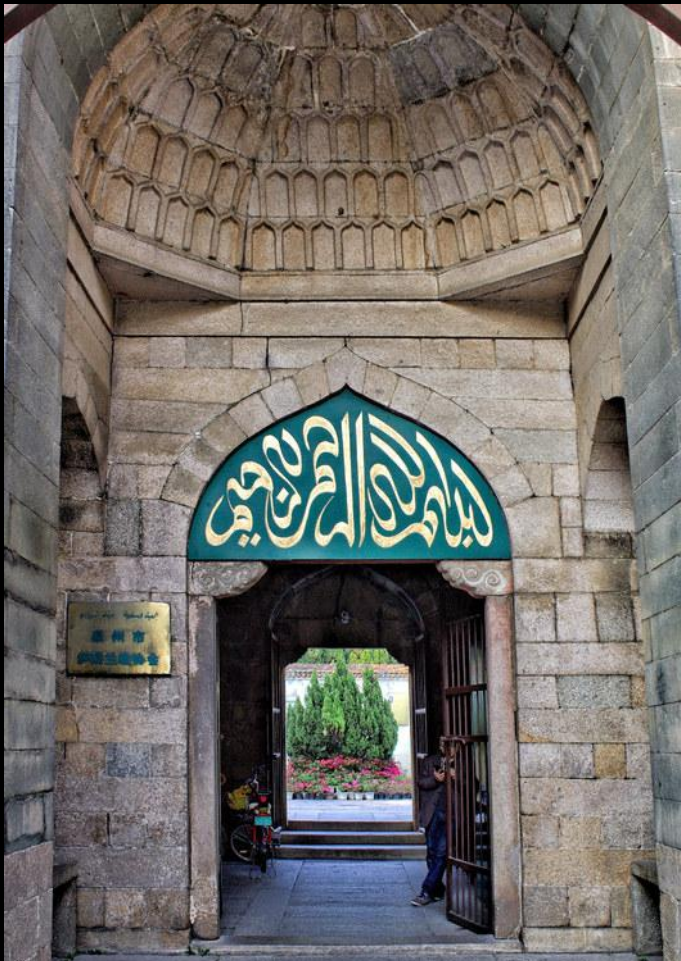
At 7h00, the bus reached the border. Once out of China, I asked the driver to let me off and continued by bicycle—only to be stopped by police and told cycling was illegal on those roads. There wasn't a single alternative route. A few minutes later, the same bus came past and picked me up again. I felt like a stray parcel.

Hong Kong Island was a frenzy of skyscrapers, buses, and trams. I felt tiny and tried not to collide with anything.

Accommodation was a nightmare. The Rugby-7s were on, and every hole was filled. Eventually, I found a room at Alisan Guesthouse—only the staff room was available, with a tiny bed included. It was cheap by Hong Kong standards, so I took it.

That night, only the Holiday Inn had space, which says it all about prices.

Later, I met up with Carlos, a South African friend living in Hong Kong, for coffee and a long-overdue catch-up.



Epilogue

Looking back, China gave me everything I didn't know I needed: knee troubles that vanished only while cycling, temples that towered over entire coastlines, visa puzzles that required Olympic-level patience, and more curious onlookers than a circus performer could handle. I arrived covered in mud, left covered in stories, and pedalled every one of those 2,795 kilometres with equal parts bewilderment and delight. China was vast, contradictory, chaotic, generous—and it left me pedalling onward with a fuller heart, stronger legs, and a deep appreciation for the unexpected. I will be back.



李贄故居



李贄
(1527-1602)

李贄，字宏甫，号卓吾，自号温陵居士。福建泉州人。明代杰出的思想家、史学家、文学家。李贄七岁入塾，颖悟力学，成童能文。二十六岁中举。历任河南辉县教谕、南北两京国子监博士、礼部司务、南京刑部郎中、云南姚安知府等职。五十四岁辞官，长期于湖北黄安、麻城等地讲学著书。七十六岁遭朝廷追捕，在通州就捕，愤而自刎于狱中。以身殉志。著有《焚书》、《藏书》、《初学集》、《续学集》等书，并批点小说、戏曲多种传世。



About this Chapter

This chapter accounts for my cycle ride along the South Coast of China from Xiamen to Nanning. If the intention is to use it 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.

Time of year and date

I visited 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 be upgraded or demolished. The hills may or may not be as steep as described, but they sure felt that way 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 make sure you have good quality, padded cycling shorts. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but one can cycle in any comfortable footwear. Southern China is hot in summer but cold in winter; pack accordingly. Pack personal toiletries, including insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I recommend using a cycling helmet.

The bicycle

Any bicycle will do as long as 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 has 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 Organic Maps or Google Maps to find my way. I also find a handlebar bag essential for holding a camera and other items you need during the day.



ABOUT CHINA

Capital City

China's capital city is Beijing. Provincial-level administrative divisions, or provinces, are the highest level of Chinese administration, and China has 34 such divisions. However, this book covers only four: Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan, and Guangxi. Fuzhou is the capital of Fujian, Guangzhou the capital of Guangdong, Haikou the capital of Hainan, and Nanning the capital 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

Mandarin is the official dialect of China, but it has more than 297 languages, including Cantonese, Min, Gan, Wu, and Hakka.

Religion

China has many religions, including Buddhism, Chinese folklore, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Location and size

China is one of the countries considered part of the Far East, located along the South and East China Seas. 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, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

Population

China, with over 1.4 billion people, is the world's most populous country. According to the census at the end of 2010, the sex ratio is about 51.27% male and 48.73% female. About 49.68% of the population lives in urban areas, while the rest lives 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. You can buy them at service booths, supplier shops, and phone stores on just about 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 to install a Virtual Private Network, or VPN. A VPN can help you access restricted websites in China by masking your browsing activity. Unfortunately, VPNs are hard to find in the country, so make sure you buy and install one before you arrive in China. Also, choose a paid service rather than a free one, since the Great Firewall can easily block free VPNs.



About the Author

Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.









There's nothing more exciting than being on my way to a place I've never been before.



