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HEADLINE: AROUND THE CORNER, AN AGELESS CHINA

BYLINE: By Richard Bernstein

BODY:

RICHARD BERNSTEIN, a reporter on the metropolitan staff of The Times, is the author of "From the Center of the Earth: the Search for the Truth About China."

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

There is another Peking, far less monumental and imposing than the city of the major tourist attractions, but more intricate and just as intriguing. Perhaps because there is never time enough, or possibly because of the habitual privacy of the Chinese, this other Peking is rarely seen by foreigners visiting the city for just a few days.

This Peking consists of the ancient neighborhoods crisscrossed by narrow lanes, called hutung in the Peking dialect of the Chinese language, that give the city much of its character. During two and a half years in China's capital, I spent whole mornings or afternoons exploring them, often at random, sometimes with a reprinted guidebook written in the 1930's called "In Search of Old Peking," by two English residents, L.C. Arlington and William Lewisohn. It was far more than just a local's snobbery that made me think the tourists, who only saw the imperial monuments, were missing an important part of Peking's enchantment.

The city's neighborhoods, many of them just a few yards from the major avenues, are quiet places of everyday life; sometimes they seem more like small villages on the North China plain than part of one of the world's great modernizing cities. They are filled with ancient, crowded houses, tiled roofs and delicate wooden latticework that together form a pattern like the crackling on old porcelain.

In the small alleys, women, some with tiny, bound feet that hint of decades past, push their grandchildren in rickety strollers past immense iron-hinged doors. From inside the houses come the sounds of washing and cooking and children playing. Courtyards, jumbled with brick shanties and piles of building tile, cooking braziers and trees, are partially visible through the high, curved imperial-style entryways.

The hutung are scattered all over the city, so to see them simply walk down any of the small lanes or alleys projecting from the principal streets. They are entirely safe at any time of the day or night. But a random stroll in the alleys poses some of the problems that travel in China poses generally for people unfamiliar with the country. Indeed, China can be a challenge to the

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Westerner. Hotels are usually drab, dim, and not very clean. Good, detailed maps of even commonly visited cities like Peking are not available. Restaurants, except for the few, more expensive ones with special facilities for foreigners are crowded, poor in quality, and far from tidy. There are hardly any cafes or tea shops or any other areas for rest.

As for walking in the city on your own, street signs are only in Chinese and there are few English speakers who could give directions. To overcome some of these difficulties, I have formulated two itineraries for tours in the ancient neighborhoods of Peking that I think will be relatively easy even for the first-time visitor to follow.

The two areas are laid out like grids, with principal streets crossed by small lanes; even if you don't follow the directions precisely, there is little danger of getting lost.

The first suggestion is to combine dinner at the Bamboo Garden Hotel with an evening stroll of about half an hour in one of Peking's most alluring residential areas. The Bamboo Garden Hotel is in the north of the city and is reachable by taxi from any of the tourist hotels in, at most, 20 minutes. The hotel is particularly recommended during the warm weather season, from June through September, when its outdoor garden restaurant, the only one in Peking, is open. Still, you can go to the hotel, and take the postprandial stroll at any time of year, though you should bundle up well in winter. Both the indoor and outdoor restaurants offer well-prepared Chinese dishes, good service and prices of \$5 to \$10 a person. The hotel was formerly the home of one Kang Sheng, the late chief of the Chinese secret police, and its spacious arcades and courtyards provide rare hint of what life is like for top-ranking Chinese Communist officials.

After dinner, the hotel can call a taxi for your trip home and you should ask that the driver be instructed to stop on the way at the Drum Tower (Gu-lou in Chinese), about five minutes from the Bamboo Garden. Awaiting there is one of those enchanting experiences that have long drawn foreigners to Peking.

The Drum Tower, which is strangely unvisited by the vast majority of tourists, was built by the Yung Lo Emperor of the Ming Dynasty when the capital of China was moved in the 15th century from Nanjing to Peking. It is constructed of brick below and wood above and soars 99 powerful but graceful feet into the sky. In back of the Drum Tower, a hundred yards or so away, is the stone and brick Bell Tower, also built by the Yung Lo Emperor. Between the two towers stretch some hutung of particular village-like charm.

One night last summer, after dinner at the Bamboo Garden, the moon was out and the sight of the two immense, ancient towers, with their curved roofs standing out against the purple sky, was awesome. There were only a few people coming in and out of the entryways to the tightly packed stone houses. Lights flickered behind latticed windows. The doors that interrupted the clay wall at irregular intervals were thick and tarnished with age. These imposing and weathered antiques, decorated with iron, alone are practically worth the visit.

A girl holding a bucket of water emerged from one courtyard, surprised to see a foreigner standing in front of her house; she stared for a minute, then smiled, poured the water out onto the street and turned back into the darkness of the entryway. Nearby a young man sat on a stool outside his home and played the erhu, a twostring instrument with the twangy, atonal quality typical of

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traditional Chinese music. The combination of slightly dissonant melody, ancient stone houses and walls, the calm of the evening and, of course, the two towers outlined against the sky made one feel somehow close to the heart of immemorial China.

There are many other neighborhoods just as suggestive of old Peking and just as accessible. My second suggested itinerary is in one of the most historic areas, a section stretching behind the Peking Hotel, where many tourists stay and which is easy to reach by taxi from other hotels. This area is easy to explore, given its regular pattern of north-south avenues and small east-west lanes.

The main thoroughfare running alongside the hotel and to the north is called Wangfujing (literally, well of the prince's mansion), a main shopping street. To embark on this tour, walk down Wangfujing; keep the hotel on your left and pass the New China Bookstore and, a bit farther down, the teeming Dongfeng (East Wind) market on the right.

On either side of Wangfujing are small lanes that extend east and west through one of the quarters of the old Manchu nobility. The sixth street on the left after the Peking Hotel is a rather broad one called East Flowery Gate Street from which you can see one of the imposing side gates to the Forbidden City, the former imperial palace.

The next lane to the north is Xila Hutung, commonly translated as Pewter Lane, a kind of Park Place of old Peking where many wealthy Manchus had their homes. On this lane in the mid-19th century a Manchu princess named Yehonala was born and brought up. She was later to move to the nearby Forbidden City as the Xien Feng Emperor's favorite concubine and, eventually, during the final unhappy years of the Manchu Dynasty, she ruled China as the autocratic and reactionary Empress Dowager Zu Xi.

Unfortunately, warehouses and sooty workshops mix with the old houses on Pewter Lane and have deprived it of some of its charm. But elsewhere along Wangfujing and on either side of it are ancient hutung, with names like Goldfish Lane and Lantern Market Lane, which have retained much of their old character.

Beyond Pewter Lane and across Wangfujing, set back from the street, is the East Church. Built originally in 1666 by Jesuits who, because of their knowledge of astronomy, were the only Europeans allowed by the imperial government to live in Peking, the church is a piece of the West transplanted. It was burned to the ground during the Boxer Rebellion at the beginning of this century and then rebuilt. During the 1950's, it was converted into an elementary school but, on Sundays, and on such holidays as Easter and Christmas, Roman Catholic services are held, attended usually by 600 to 700 local Christians.

The fourth lane beyond the church on the right is Pao Fa Hutung, or Newspaper House Lane. Just a few steps in and on the far side of the street are the remains of one of the major temples of Peking, the Fa Hua Si, or Temple of Buddha's Glory, built in the 15th century by a pious eunuch called Liu Tong. All that remains of the temple is a small antechamber. Nonetheless, Newspaper House Lane attests to the way new and old Peking blend. All along the alley the original walls and entry gates, battered with age and use, remain standing. But behind them, the old houses have been torn down and replaced by new four- or five-story concrete apartment blocks.

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If you walk down Newspaper House Lane to the next big intersection, you will find yourself on another major shopping street, Dongsì, which runs parallel to Wangfujing. Dongsì is crowded with bicycles, buses and shoppers and is a fascinating spectacle in itself.

If you go right on Dongsì and then into the eighth small lane on the left, you will see in about 200 yards an imposing gate and, beyond it, a courtyard filled with gnarled trees and old tile-roofed houses. This is the site of the first Chinese Foreign Ministry, which was called the Zungli Ge Guo Yamen, or Board for the Management of the Affairs of All Countries. Until the middle of the 19th century, China considered itself supreme among all other countries. The Zungli Ge Guo Yamen, created in 1860 after the shock that came in confrontation with the military superiority of the West, was China's first recognition that it would have to deal with other countries more or less as equals. The site is now a residential compound belonging to a local institute.

From the site of the Yamen, continue down the lane and take the first turning to the right. Here a tiny street winds southward through one of the most beautiful small neighborhoods in the city. The small lanes are narrow and quiet, with white-washed brick walls broken here and there by characteristically Chinese tile-roofed entryways and massive wooden doors. Unpaved and dusty, this area is typical of the old residential architecture of North China. A walk south down the lanes will eventually end up on another hutung, this one called Foreign Ministry Street (after the Republican-era government office) that leads back to Dongsì.

To this point, your walk will have taken about an hour or 90 minutes. To get back to the starting point, the Peking Hotel, by following the lane across Dongsì to Wangfujing and then left, will take another 20 minutes.

If you still have time and energy, however, you can turn left on Dongsì and continue exploring. Across the next intersection, about 15 minutes farther down, for example, is an old, unused Buddhist temple rising like a ghost over the ramshackle houses that surround it. A little farther north on an alley called Three Strip Hutung is one of Peking's best free markets where a long line of grizzled peasants hawk apples and ginger root, songbirds and fresh flowers in front of an immense earthen retaining wall. Such private markets were forbidden in China, after the Cultural Revolution of 1966, but, since 1979, they have returned with a vengeance.

That these markets are back suggests something pleasantly old-fashioned and timeless about the styles of everyday life in North China. For years, scholars of China and other visitors have been searching for something called "the real China."

In fact, China is a varied country that includes both the ancient and the modern. During my explorations I never found anything more alluring than Peking's old residential neighborhoods, a small part of the "real China" where ordinary people have lived for centuries.

Guide to traveling in China

Tours and Flights A few tourists manage to go to China on their own. The Hong Kong office of the state-run China International Travel Service will often grant individual tourist visas for major cities like Peking or Shanghai. Most

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first-time visitors will find that individual travel is fraught with difficulties: Few Chinese speak English; hotels are impossible to book in advance; local transportation is crowded and slow. Thus, since they opened the country to large-scale tourism three years ago, Chinese authorities have encouraged pre-arranged group tours. Virtually all tours are sponsored by travel agencies in this country or in Hong Kong and are operated in conjunction with the Travel Service, which provides English-speaking guides who are usually friendly and attentive. The tour price depends, naturally, on duration, on the number of places included, and on the quality of accommodations. Special Tours for Special People (250 West 57th Street, New York, N.Y. 10019; 212-586-6577) charges about \$2,995 for a 15-day program, including hotels, all meals, sightseeing, and round-trip air fare to Peking from the West Coast. Among offerings from Orient Flexi-Pax Tours (630 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; 212-692-9550) is an 11-night tour of Peking and four other cities for \$1,540 from Hong Kong, not including air fare to Hong Kong. With Lindblad Travel (8 Wright Street, Westport, Conn. 06881; 203-226-8531), a 25-day tour that includes a cruise on the Yangtse River, costs about \$3,695 from Hong Kong. Pan American World Airways and CAAC, the Chinese national airline, have direct flights to Peking at roughly \$1,600 round trip. A New York-Hong Kong flight costs about \$1,130. Taxis inside China, which must be booked at hotels and are impossible to flag on city streets, are relatively cheap, with fares running about \$2.50 to \$3 for a five-mile journey. Peking Restaurants Most pre-arranged tours include a dinner at one of Peking's special roast-duck restaurants. Most other meals are taken at hotels. The tourist guide can help with reservations and transportation to the better restaurants, most of which have separate rooms for foreigners. In Peking, perhaps the most splendid of these is the Fang Shan Restaurant, situated inside an ornate courtyard in Beihai Park. Spicy Sichuanese cuisine can be had at the Sichuan Restaurant, which is inside a converted imperial-style home. The Kang Le Restaurant, not far from the Llama Temple, specializes in the cuisine of Yunnan Province; the Jinyang Restaurant, near the Temple of Heaven, serves crispy duck and other dishes from Shanxi Province. Prices: from \$10 to \$15 a person. A bottle of local wine will cost perhaps \$3. There's no tipping. R.B.

GRAPHIC: Illustrations: photo of bicyclists photo of gate to the city maps of Peking photo of food shop

SUBJECT: TRAVEL AND VACATIONS; GEOGRAPHIC PROFILES

GEOGRAPHIC: PEKING (CHINA)