

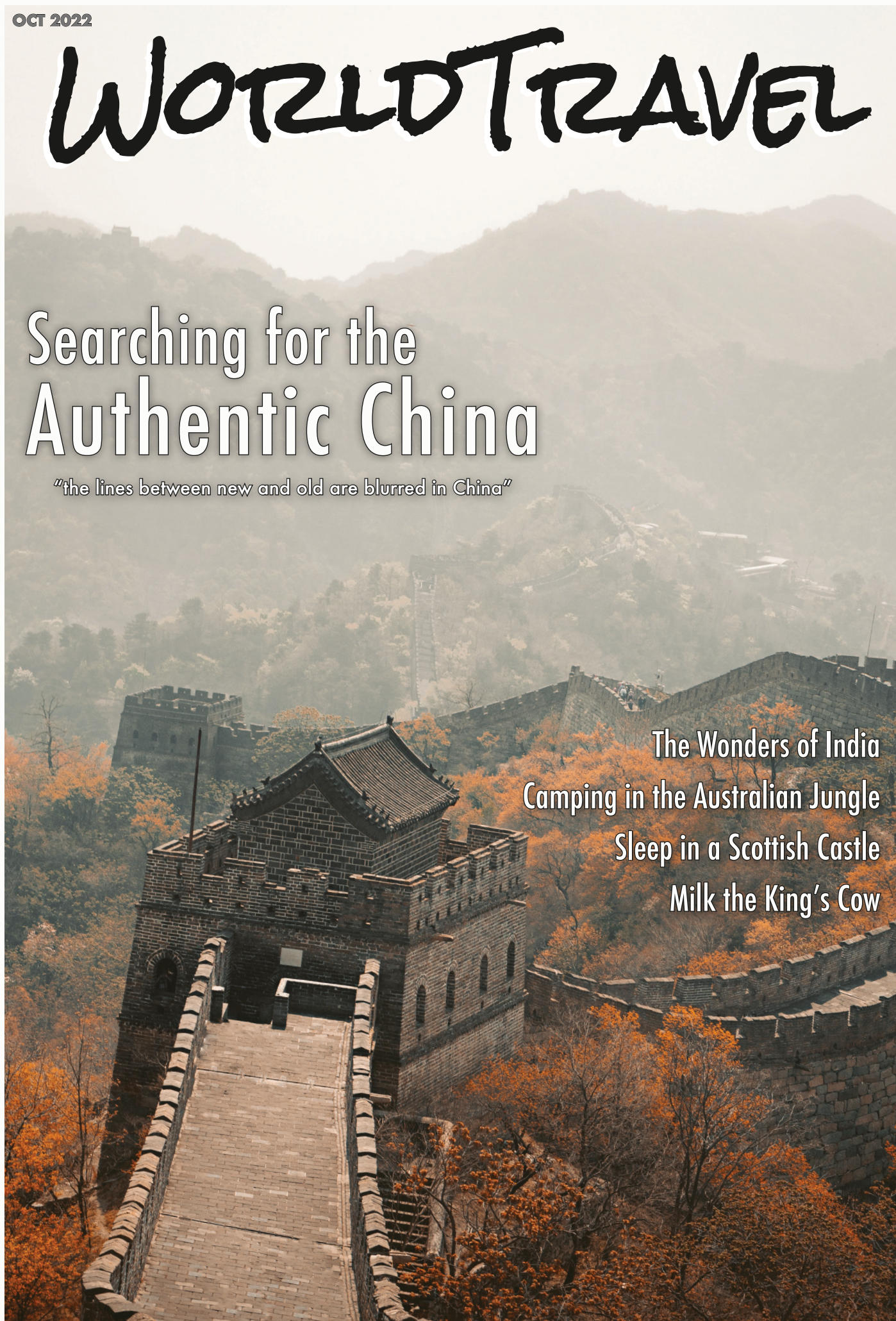
OCT 2022

WORLD TRAVEL

Searching for the Authentic China

"the lines between new and old are blurred in China"

The Wonders of India
Camping in the Australian Jungle
Sleep in a Scottish Castle
Milk the King's Cow



Searching for the Authentic China

BY STUART FINCH

I admit that like many people, I rely on guidebooks when planning trips abroad and it can be difficult to avoid the apparent ubiquitous monopoly of 'Lonely Planet'. Their recommendations can quickly become swamped (often deservedly) with English speaking travelers all searching for the best and most 'authentic' experiences of that destination.

Europeans have been travelling to and writing about China since the days of Marco Polo, each with their own perspective and agenda; with the aid of the internet it is now possible to access all these different accounts, both historical and contemporary, with ease.

So what is the most 'authentic' Chinese experience? We have visited places that would feature on many

people's "Top 10" list for China (or even the world) and many have been recognised as important by their UNESCO world heritage listing.

Sometimes we were joined by crowds of other tourists, others we had the place to ourselves to quietly contemplate what it all meant but we often struggled to identify with the authenticity of where we were visiting.

Bronze lion statue in front of a temple in Beijing.



Traditional farming methods are practiced for tourists.

"few people have been willing to part with what has become an essential part of their homes"

Given the age and expansive history of China it's not surprising that many sites have been remodeled, rebuilt and restored. The Great Wall was built over many hundreds of years and started as a mud bank – the current brick fascia and ramparts weren't added until the Ming dynasty, 400 years ago. In places these have been restored so that it's possible to walk on the wall and imagine yourself repelling (unsuccessfully) Mongol invaders, in others it is left crumbling and impassable. So which is the 'authentic' Great Wall experience – wandering along the original mud embankment?

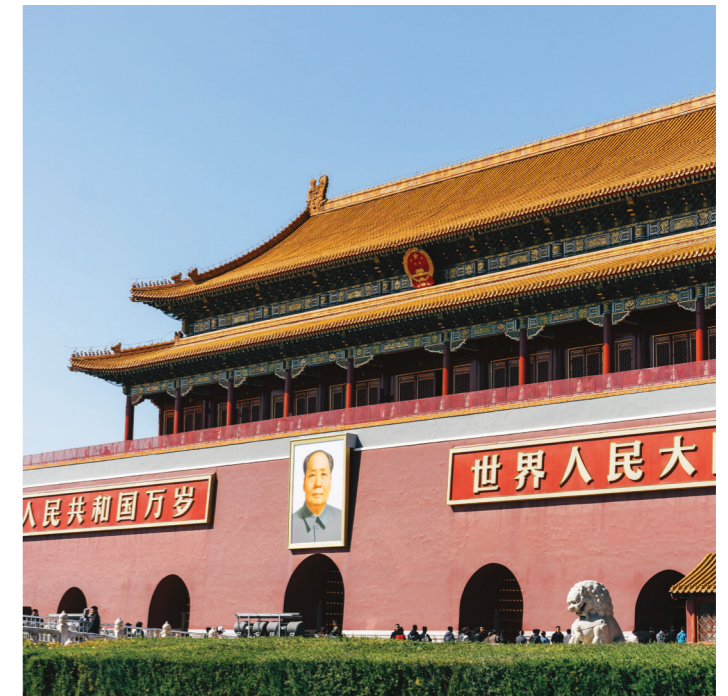
China's new wealth has seen many towns and cities invest in new infra-structure. Images of Shanghai's towering skyline are well known but it has seemed like nearly all cities in China are in the process of a building boom. Huge, 30 storey, lego-block apartment buildings are appearing on the outskirts of most cities to meet the needs of the growing population. Old quarters of towns are razed to make way for modernity and, in some cases, brand-new 'ancient' buildings.

The Terracotta Army of Qin Shi Huang is painstakingly preserved.

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In Datong, Shanxi Province, the city government are in the process of investing in tourism by rebuilding the entire ancient city – knocking down any building taller than three stories, replacing them with copies of Ming and Qing dynasty low-rise housing (although they will actually to be used for retail) and rebuilding the city walls to the exact plan from 600 years ago. The original walls were removed as the city expanded and life became more peaceful, the stone used to build more housing. Local officials have offered money to buy back these stones for the reconstructed walls but needless to say, few people have been willing to part with what has become an essential part of their homes.

Instead the city walls have been rebuilt using brand-new stone, which gives a certain Las Vegas or Disneyland quality to the overall effect. Although there is the greater problem that the original walls had passed through what is now a communist party building, who are rather reluctant to move... So the city has just three of the four ‘defensive’ walls rebuilt.



The Forbidden City.

There are many more examples of local government investment into rebuilding ancient buildings to lure in the tourist. Some look like and are used as sets for TV and film, others are plain replacements for relics lost in the cultural revolution, many have been over-restored (including, in my opinion, parts of ‘The Forbidden City’) and there is, of course, a significant chunk that were built ‘around 2008’.

Like the road-sweeper’s 40 year-old broom that has been completely replaced, in parts, over the working lifetime of its owner, few places are truly original and nor would we want them preserved. The guidebooks may describe places and ‘ancient’, ‘like it was years ago’ and even ‘hoary’ but the truth is that the lines between new and old are blurred in China and neither is more (or less) authentic than the other.