

Extract from:

Gridlock with Sesame Brittle

‘Greg ... we’d like you to travel around China for us.’ It was Pete D’Onghia on the phone from Lonely Planet. I took a deep breath, pondering the words. The statement should have accompanied fireworks of joy, but his tone sounded like a trip to the supermarket was on offer. ‘Actually’, he continued, ‘we want you to *eat* your way around China’. Now you’re talking. ‘And between thirty-course banquets, shoot a few snaps for a food guide we’re producing. Are you interested?’

My mind’s eye conjured a smoky restaurant in Beijing. Hunkered-down diners in Chairman Mao caps gorged at communal tables strewn with food. Though I’d never been to China, I nonetheless saw myself ensconced amid them, tucking into succulent morsels of tender roast duck, steam curling upward from a side order of dumplings. The journey would all unfold that way, I assumed – a belly-bulging gourmandising food feast – as I swept heroically around one of the world’s most ancient food cultures unearthing snippets of photographic gold. ‘Yes!!’, I finally responded, stifling screams of excitement, ‘I’m available in October and November and frankly, any other month you’d care to choose’.

Documenting the culinary culture of China might sound like a dream job. Clearly it did to me, though I should know better. I’ve trodden a similar path in numerous destinations. Chased down regional cuisines on three continents while juggling jet lag and cryptic foreign customs. Not to mention dodging muggings or worse. And food poisoning is, of course, par for the course – as a merry-go-round of destinations blurs to a montage of head-spinning chaos. You want overseas holidays? Forget this job.

And the fun begins the moment you land.

I accepted the assignment, my mind lost in an Eastern spiced cocktail of escapism and adventure. Travel is my opiate; a fix is always overdue.

After twenty hours of aerial commuting I stood on the threshold of the Middle Kingdom, sleep deprived and sardine packed into the departure hall at Guangzhou airport. I was meant to be in transit, a short hop to nearby Guilin in Guangxi province. But the runway was banked up for hours, and around me was a sea of humanity, the air thick with sweat. Crotchety passengers lay in bedraggled waves along rows of scungy leatherette lounges, a flotsam of over-sized carry-on bags scattered around them. Shell-shocked families huddled in tight knots, panicked women broke ranks to accost scowling attendants at the departure gates and a crusty-eyed businessman next to me sat resolutely, as he had done for twenty-four hours. ‘Welcome to China’.

