

Extract from:

## Great Wall of Scorpions

Usually, even in China, if you throw money at your problems it helps, or at least makes the situation seem less dire. So, despite my run of photographic bad luck, I lashed out on a chauffer-driven car for the three of us to visit the Great Wall. Everything would run smoothly, and I'd get some great shots of one of the man-made wonders of the world. The outing had nothing to do with food, but I figured my publishers could make up a weird statistic to justify the shots – of the sort the Great Wall inspires. Something culinary, along the lines of 'You'd need 52,000 tonnes of noodles, or forty-three million dumplings, or 725.6 million fried scorpions to completely cover the entire length of the Great Wall'.

Our driver was David, a Chinese tour guide with a mumbling grasp of English whom I'd met at the Forbidden City. He'd been taking visitors to the Great Wall for the last twelve years, so he said, and told us the best section to visit was at Mutianyu. It was only one and a half hours north of Beijing, had few tourists and many spectacularly photogenic hills crowned by ancient watchtowers. At least that was my optimistic translation of David's contorted half-spoken sales pitch. We were in his hands.

At 5.30am on our last day in Beijing, Oscar, Jacqui and I bundled out of our hotel in predawn darkness into David's black VW Santana. Foul winds whipped at our clothes as we loaded baby and camera gear into the car. We hoped to arrive at the wall soon after sunrise for awe-inspiring early morning shots. Of course, good sunrise photography depends on a sunrise and not some dirty smudge on the eastern horizon. Alas, after days of a perfect cobalt-blue dome over Beijing, a change had come through, the sky charged with brooding clouds.

We sped along the freeway as a bleak grey dawn broke through leafless trees lurching in the breeze. I recalled memories of hundreds of Great Wall images, all lit by pure sunshine and blue-sky backdrops. I asked David, 'Is it usually sunny at the Great Wall?'. With an automaton reply that seemed to be the sum of his emotive range, he intoned, 'Usually like this'. I'd heard of the Great Wall's tendency towards taciturn weather from other sources, too. Paul, the tour leader I'd met on the train, said that in six months of tours there he'd rarely struck a clear day.

I comforted myself with the thought of breakfast. Maybe there'd be Mongolian hot pot vendors by the roadside, with steaming cauldrons ready to serve up a tasty brew. (Why I thought this might be the case, I don't know, except that we were heading vaguely in the direction of Mongolia.) I whimsically suggested the possibility of hot pot to David. But he curtly replied, 'We stop at McDonald's in Huairou, next town'. McDonalds! Out here! I was shattered. Looking around at the deserted roadside and shut shops as we came into the concrete and tile landscape of Huairou, it was obvious my slightly romantic breakfast might perhaps have existed fifty or a hundred years ago. Today it was all KFC and Macca's, or something very

similar. Ah, the rewards of Western progress. Resigned to my fate, I figured McDonald's in China might be curiously interesting – maybe it would have duck burger, and it would be called a Big Quak? But it was closed. We couldn't even get fries for breakfast.

Just beyond Huairou, our car developed gearbox trouble – we were stuck in fourth gear. David was worried, but I figured we'd just get there a bit quicker. Then I realised as we approached the Great Wall and the road grew ever steeper, we were in deep trouble. In order to keep us from stalling, David was forced to maintain speed as the road wound around mountain bends ever more tightly. He began careering into blind corners half on the wrong side of the road, viscously riding the clutch to keep up revs as the vehicle slowly lost speed. Eventually, on a hard incline, we began to bunny hop, bouncing comically for fifty metres or so before chugging to a dead stop. David's cheeks and forehead flushed crimson, his mouth twitching at the edges as we sat motionless beside the road. For him, this was more than an embarrassing inconvenience, it was loss of pride or, as the Chinese call it, a loss of face. And nothing, for Chinese, is worse than loss of face. All at once his usually reticent demeanour boiled over in a black frenzy of flat panic as he bashed madly at the gear stick between us. Stumped for options, he regained his senses momentarily and turned to me. 'Do you know about these things?' he pleaded. His expression was all the more deranged, shrouded by a thick wad of now dishevelled and drooping hair. 'I think you should go to a motor mechanic', I replied, in my most sympathetic yet firm voice.

David stared blankly in my direction for a small eternity, as if registering the thought across his few unfrazzled synapses, perhaps even assessing the distance to the nearest garage. But suddenly his jaw tightened; impulse triumphed over reason in a desperate flurry of console grappling and a mighty shove at the gear stick. It literally broke off in his hand. 'Oooooouuu', a tortured whimper escaped from his mouth, and he began flopping the broken stick around on the console as if it was a dead animal, hoping to coax the thing back to life. Then, in desperation, he jammed the stick back into the gearbox with a mighty shove, willing it into miraculous repair, but soon gave up, defeated. Rolling the car backwards down the slope, we silently coasted into a roadside car park fifty metres away. At least we were all in one piece, I thought. Perking up, David surmised – in a strangely optimistic tone causing immediate suspicion – our destination, the Great Wall, might be 'only one or two kilometres away'.

Yet before we could discuss options, David's eyes lit with a grim fire of determination. Unexplained, he began gunning our car in wild circuits of the small vacant car park, playing the clutch to slowly build up speed, churning up ruts of gravel around the perimeter. We sat tight, gripping our seats, perplexed by his actions. Gasping suddenly, we realised David's crazed plan, as he wrenched the steering wheel to the right, launching the car out onto the narrow road near a blind corner. We could have been killed. Oblivious to danger, David was desperate to get us to the wall whatever the risk; he would not be disgraced. We quickly lost speed against the incline, though David was pumping the accelerator ferociously, riding the clutch mercilessly and yelling an ever-more intense litany of the foulest Chinese expletives he could muster, cursing life into his wounded carriage. The car

soon chugged on the gradient, engine slowing to a coughing shudder, before the now-familiar bunny hop to a ridiculous stop about thirty metres from the car park. Dejectedly, he rolled us backward again.

Still stunned by the total stupidity of David's failed plan, I remained silent, presuming we'd now do the sensible thing and walk, however far it was. But incredibly, before we could get out of the car, he started off again. Momentarily I relaxed, presuming he was going to a mechanic. No! He was trying his burn-around-the-car-park idea once more. Accelerating in ever-faster circuits, revving the engine like some crazed teenage hoon, again he swung wildly around the limits of the small enclosure and flung us onto the road. Naturally, the same thing happened. Through a waft of clutch smoke, we rolled dangerously back towards the blind corner and into the car park.

It is embarrassing to admit, but for some reason we didn't come to our senses. I should have given David a few choice words. At the very least, Jacqui and I should have just grabbed Oscar and jumped out of the car – fast. Because he did it again! We sat there, completely incredulous, as David gunned the motor. This time we knew exactly what was going on. I considered grabbing the steering wheel, but that might have been even more perilous. Trapped in the vehicle, we were soon careening towards the road yet again, launching into another potential head-on collision, and going through the same slow dying of engine revs and pitiful chug-chug-hop to a dead-dead stop.

Finally, I unglued my hands from the dashboard and mutinied against David's dire folly. In reality the whole episode had happened in a few short minutes, though it seemed to go on forever. I offered our maniacal driver some thinly veiled suggestions, convincing him that walking *was* the best option. Fortunately, he concurred. Though my manner, strangely, was hardly admonishing. I should have been in a fuming rage, but instead was incredibly restrained; I couldn't believe my restraint! David had subjected my fledgling family to numerous life-threatening situations. Now we faced a walk of an unknown distance, carrying camera gear and baby up a steep incline to the Great Wall, which itself was no Sunday picnic to traverse. And the weather was abysmal. The temperature was hovering somewhere around freezing point, abetted by a whipping wind that seemed to cut through any amount of clothing. Yet both Jacqui and I were in good spirits. Buoyed by the thought of clambering up an ancient wall.

But what a wall! My mood was such that I could have paced out ten kilometres. I didn't have to test this impulse as the village of Mutianyu, which formed the entrance to the Great Wall at this point, was just around a bend. We were so close; it made David's antics seem all the more insane. Passing through a slumbering gauntlet of closed souvenir shops coursed by icy gusts, our coats were buffeted and crinkled leaves whipped our faces. I'd given up all hope of any clear weather for photography. Instead, I was preparing my mind's eye to capitalise on the prevailing conditions; conjuring images of mist-shrouded watchtowers backed by distant peaks; evocative visions of China's ancient fortified barrier that enclosed an unknowable world from the onslaught of infidels. In this way (though not always so romantically), I often try to picture the scene I'll be photographing, composing an imaginary vista. It's called previsualisation, a well-known

photographic term – though most people think I’m daydreaming. That’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it.

With a baby in tow, we decided to take the chairlift instead of walking to the top of the wall, which lay perhaps a hundred metres above us on the summit of a rise. David, now devoid of all optimism, said glumly, ‘Chairlift maybe closed; too much wind’. Fortunately it wasn’t, but the ‘Ropeway’, as it was more disconcertingly called on the English warning sign, did look a little dangerous with dangling metal chairs tilting sideways in the blustering gusts. At the ticketing counter we learnt of an extra charge for ‘accident insurance’ – just in case we weren’t already worried enough.

With a low threatening hum, a howling wind caught the ropeway as we were hastily scooped into a fast-moving turnstile chair, lunging us wallward. I made a silent prayer for a weather change and looked towards the heavens. Amazingly the sky was clearing. Through the brooding cloudbank, patches of blue appeared. I nearly bounced out of my seat with joy. By the time we were flung off the chairlift on top of the wall, the cloud was thinning fast. As we bounded around the first watchtower, a flood of low morning sunshine glanced along the wall’s northern face. Like a twisting golden dragon, it crested a hilltop and wound away to the west. Despite the trials of the morning, we’d actually made it to the Great Wall, and the sun was applauding our determination.

I felt compelled to jump up and down, not so much through elation, but to check my footing. I found it almost impossible to believe this structure truly existed, that it wasn’t some flimsy Hollywood film set; I was conditioned to seeing it as an image rather than a reality. But here it was, an unthinkable large mass of cleaved stone and mortar, fashioned into a snaking megalith stretching for thousands of kilometres (though not, as some assume, in an unbroken line, and not always made of stone). This section of the wall was built largely during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD) and refurbished in the 1980s. I looked along the wall to its stone watchtowers set at about two hundred-metre intervals. Once permanently manned, they were used, among other things, as smoke-signal posts – by the burning of wolf dung.

At this hour the wall was deserted, save for a lonely Chinese woman sweeping around a watchtower, wrapped in layers of rags against the cold. How many kilometres did she have to sweep, we wondered? She doubled as a postcard seller, pulling a ten-pack from between her rags. I stopped, panting heavily to catch my breath, and perused her wares, quite taken aback by the amazing inclines our section of wall was traversing. It’s not just the improbability of the wall’s design – heaving up, over and down the landscape – which is so impressive. It’s sheer scale, when viewed first hand is utterly daunting. The Great Wall, of course, has some of the greatest construction statistics of any manmade edifice. Its awesome length, generally said (depending on your source) to be some 6700 kilometres; the estimated seven million lives lost in its construction; and its number of bricks, which would stretch ten times around the equator if laid end to end (sorry, that’s a lie). However, it can be seen from space, though not with the naked eye.

But beyond statistics, to actually walk along the Great Wall, the reality of its presence achieves an obvious profundity. And it is truly big, as big

as I'd imagined it to be, not at all a letdown as some things are when seen first-hand. Cliché of grandeur that it is, I found all the hackneyed words of bigness rolling around in my head: awesome, stupendous, colossal, mammoth, gigantic, mind-boggling, spectacular and then some. And it all started with a good old dose of xenophobia. Just as racism and religious intolerance works so well today as a motivator for all manner of dubious practices, so too it helped galvanise a nation, though few of them willingly, to build an obstruction against the invading hordes from the north. Thanks to the terracotta warrior Emperor Qin Shi Huang, the Chinese have been building the wall in sections since the Qin dynasty in 221 BC.

For all its effort and sacrifice, the wall only partly achieved its aim. Invading armies simply went around it, or bribed the sentries. On the wall's godforsaken outposts, often perched atop mountains, you could imagine the guards would be a little starved for company and easily led astray. Picture yourself having to collect and burn smelly wolf dung all day for a living; it wouldn't take much prompting to change sides.

Walking along our first stretch of wall, a plunging stone pathway cresting a mountain ridge, the scale of its engineering became a physical reality. Unsuccessful as a fortress, it was still a symbol of Chinese supremacy, a psychological deterrent to invaders who'd have trekked for weeks only to find an unending barrier twisting into the distance.

After giving Oscar his breakfast on top of a watchtower (giving him a show and tell story for a few years hence), we started along the path in earnest – for all of a kilometre. While I lugged camera gear, Jacqui had Oscar in a sling. At the top of a rise I decided to take a photo of Oscar crawling along the path by himself – a memento of a time that he was too young to remember. I placed him down on the cold stone pathway for a moment and went back to frame up the photograph. As I was about to take the shot he started to roll away from us down the hill! Luckily I caught him before he got too far.

Exhilarating as it was, we didn't take long to run out of puff. On this section the incline is so steep that the pathway is often set with stairs; like taking on the stairwell of a ten-storey building, and then doing it again just for fun. You soon start listening to your screaming thigh and calf muscles, and reasoning that another thousand metres of torture won't reveal anything different along the uniform pathway. Nonetheless, with the clouds all but disappeared, and the wall bathed in brilliant morning sunshine, I convinced my fading pins to trudge up to a distant watchtower for a postcard snap of the scene. Ever the diligent documenter, I was thus supplying yet more pictorial evidence that there is, indeed, always sparkingly clear weather atop the Great Wall of China.

