

On and Off the Road Again

*The first meanderings about
Edie & Joe's
Sometimes Excellent Adventures*



August, 1999

for

FAPA 248

On and off the Road Again is brought to you by
Joe Siclari and Edie Stern
4599 NW 5 Ave., Boca Raton, FL 33431-4601
E-mail: jsiclari@gate.net

China Is Broadening

— Edie

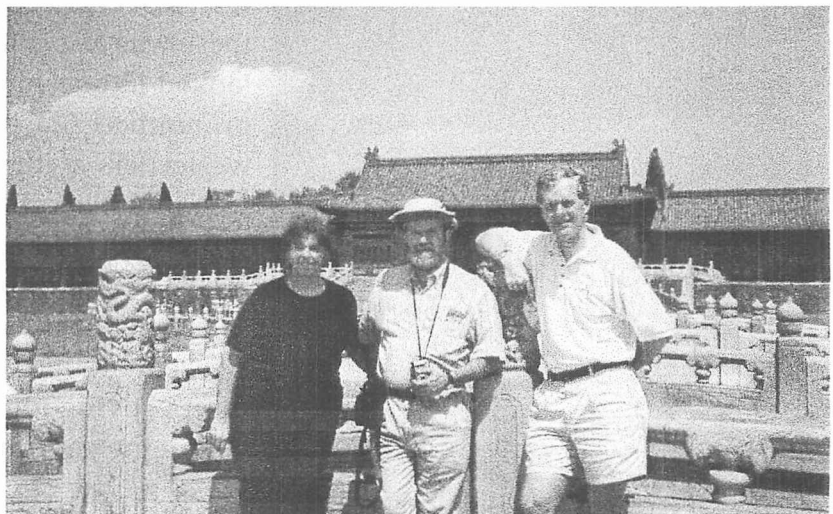
Travel is broadening, especially around the hips. This year I've eaten Danish in Denmark, Peking Duck in Beijing, and only missed having frankfurters in Frankfort by hours (it was breakfast time when I passed through). It's been a hell of a year for seeing the world, and all of it so far has been on the company nickel.

My latest and most exotic trip was to China. I was fortunate to have meetings for a week in Beijing, and was able to tack a few days extra on the trip to do a little sight seeing. This was easy duty too — only a few days preparation, a few days of meetings, and a few days of follow up when I got home. And for this they paid my way halfway around the world.

I travelled in the top part of a 747 both from JFK to Narita, Japan and from Narita to JFK. It's a quiet world on the top of the plane. Fewer folks, a little more room per capita, and a captive stairwell. This last I found very useful for a 12 hour transpacific trip. When I felt more stiffness than I could handle, I positioned myself in the stairwell where none of the passengers could see me, and where I would bother no one, and did leg exercises. The stewardesses looked at me as if I was an accident waiting to happen, but did nothing to stop me. *Quadriceps are us*. Between that and seatside stretching, the trip wasn't bad. I'm a wus, I admit it; anything over eight hours in the seat and I get whiny.

At Narita, I connected with two other Americans I'd never met before who were going to the same meetings. We were jet lagged, and formal. Within 12 hours we'd be heading in a tour bus to the Great Wall of China.

We had planned to arrive a day early to acclimate to the time change. Twelve hours difference strikes me as a little surrealistic, especially when local time is a day ahead of



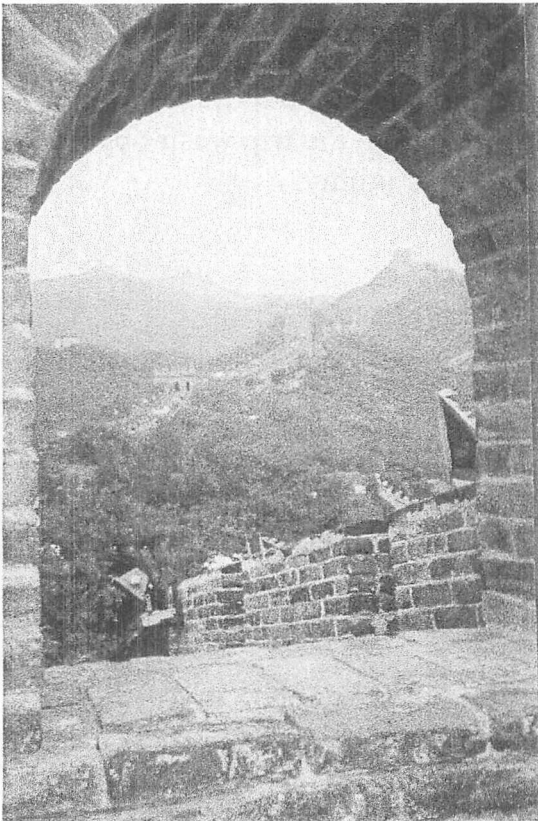
at-home time. My son, Dan, was tickled the whole trip that I was firmly in tomorrow when I called home and talked to him. Of course, I did adjust to the local time just before I went home. But, be that as it may, Monday was ours for recovery and acclimatization.

The hotel we were in was very western; it was a Holiday Inn. The Lido is the largest Holiday Inn in the world, and has restaurants, a supermarket, meeting rooms, an Air China office, and a China Tourist office.

The tourist kiosk offered wonders — the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace of the Ming Dynasty, the Great Wall of China, and more distant wonders like the Terra Cotta warriors in Xi'an, and the splendors of Shanghai. My companions and I wanted the Wall. We booked it, changed some money, and went to our rooms, which were very European.

Despite the Western hotel, there were signs in the bathroom that the water was not potable, and two bottles of drinking water were provided. I ticked off my water requirements — drinking, toothbrushing, pill taking, contact lenses and immediately started to hoard. By the end of the week, I'd be a bottle ahead. There's something about a trip that makes me thrifty anyway; I save crackers from airplanes, and plastic bags just in case, and do other things I'd never do at home. The thought of running out of water at midnight was evil.

I had come away to China without research or planning. The Welcome to Beijing pamphlet was very useful. The brochure gave an almost usable map of the city, with many labels in English.



Day 1 — The Wall Goes Ever Onward

The Lido had the usual hotel spread for breakfast. It was overpriced, but plentiful and good. Here there was also a Japanese breakfast with what looked like sashimi and things I could not pronounce. The newspaper was geared to westerners, with painfully written articles that sounded like satires of themselves, all designed to show a good image to the reader. There was an article one day about happy adoptions by westerners of Chinese female infants. There was an article denouncing the *falun gong* in avuncular disapproving tones. That one confused me. It was before the government crackdown on the *falun gong*

had made headlines in the west, and I had no idea what the article was about. In fact, three of us read it, and no one could make sense of it.

The bus came early. The day was misty, and it was drizzling, so the tour guide, whose name was Mao, took us to the Ming Tombs first. Our tour group was mixed; we three Americans, a South American couple, a Finn and a few others. After our first trip to a government tourist shop, and a short visit to a jade carving factory (using chain saws — jade is hard), we visited the 10th tomb (out of 13) of the Ming Dynasty, called (truly) Ding Ling. The tombs had replicas in them, but were mostly empty, the real grave goods having been removed elsewhere.



We drove on to the Great Wall. The mist was thick, and seemed appropriate. Later I found out that the pollution level is very high all over China, and I never was sure if the mist was mist or was something more sinister. My doctor was born in Beijing, and she tells me that she remembers lots of beautiful clear blue skies. I never saw blue sky in Beijing.

There are two places near Beijing to ascend to the Wall. The one we went to was in the hills, and had a small town, mostly one main street, at the base. Mao took us to the steps which led to the Wall proper, and told us we had two hours before we had to be back at the bus. There were two directions to walk on the wall. To the right the walk was mostly flat, and well populated with tourists and locals out for a Monday stroll. To the left, the wall walk was beautiful but steep, and less busy. We went left.

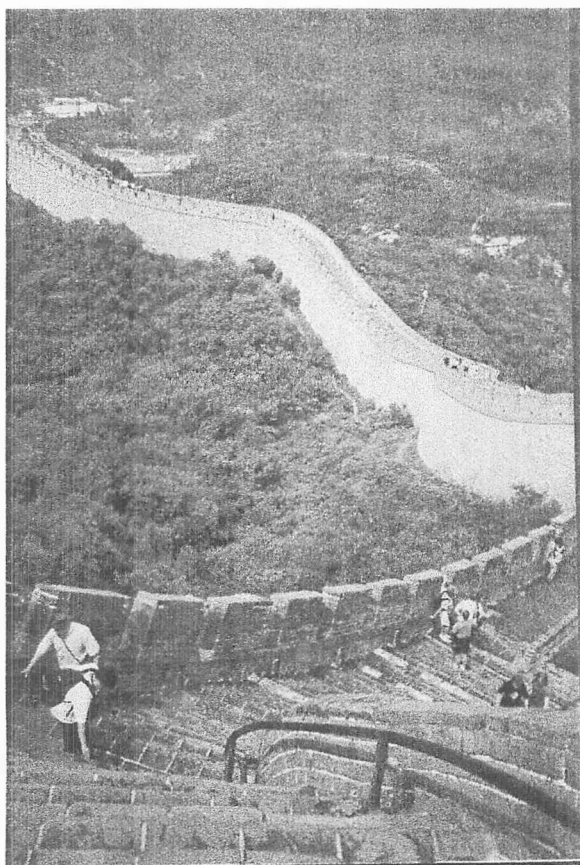
The Great Wall of China looks exactly as it should. There are guard towers at regular intervals, and the wall goes on seemingly forever into the distance. The parts prepared for the tourist trade are well maintained, with railings, lights, and



vendors with T-Shirts ("I Climbed the Great Wall of China"), silk scarves, and other small treasures. The guard towers now are empty inside, with no other floor; they're just another part of the walk on the Wall. The steepness of the walk is mostly in the steps. When the wall does an upwards climb, one must traverse flights of high, narrow steps. If you've been to Teotihuacan in Mexico City, you get the idea. Actually it's not as bad as Teotihuacan. I didn't have to use my hands to scuttle up the steps at all. The South American couple didn't get very far. I think her pants were too tight to climb much (meow).

At the edge of vision, you can see the wall far away, more desolate, without safe passage at its top. I took too many pictures of distant stretches of the wall, meandering over the hills, guard towers standing unnecessary sentinel. It was way cool.

The Wall has a contemporary effect, although I don't know how much of one. One of the tidbits I heard while in China was that there are two main gasoline companies. One operates north of the Wall, and the other south of the Wall. I wonder how much else the Wall divides. My Chinese history is abysmal. I did temporarily memorize the last half dozen dynasties on the airplane on the way to China. The notes I took from the web said that the Chinese were very proud of their history and I wanted to at least sound as if I'd tried. The first and the last dynasties look as if they sound alike, but I know they don't.



The web pages also gave a few words of Chinese for tourists to swot up. When I realized that intonation changes the meaning of a word, I stopped trying to learn any vocabulary. I was afraid that even with good intentions, I'd end up saying something rude. I finally learned how to say "hello" and "thank you". Never did learn "please". Chinese must be a wonderful language to pun in. Not only might one make the usual sorts of puns, but there'd be another dimension of words with equivalent pronunciations but with different intonations, kind of like a 3-D pun.

I walked up for about 40 minutes. Having bad knees, I knew that the downward walk would be much harder than the climbing part. It was. I came down from the Wall after an hour or so, and started serious shopping. My souvenir bring back list was five times as long as normal. Such an exotic destination seemed to call for lots of presents for people. Even my son's bowling buddy wanted a jade carving (I brought him a small jade dragon). My bargaining skills need

some honing. I think I was rooked for about 500% of the going prices on the things I bought. The exchange rate is very good, with about 8.1 yuan to the dolloar. Although I was willing to pay the prices, I hate being taken. I knew I was in trouble. At one shop, I was pleased with myself for bargaining a carving from 180 yuan down to 120. At another shop down the road, I saw the same carving for 60, and ended up getting it for 40. On the average, that's 80 yuan apiece. *sigh* There was fun in buying things I could honestly say were bought at the base of the Great Wall of China. That's worth a surcharge.

Back to the Lido, and dinner. One of my companions headed for a conference call, and so the remaining two of us ate at the hotel. My charming teeth decided to give me hell for the evening, so I sipped tepid soup and ate aspirins most of the night. I debated knocking them out with rocks, but I didn't. The thought of looking for a dentist at midnight in Beijing sent me after more aspirin. It was ok. It went away after a day.

Day 2 - 4 Meetings

Tuesday dinner was a banquet, with Peking Duck and far too much food. Peking is the old name of the city. With the revolution, Peking was renamed Beijing which means northern capital (unless I now have them reversed). I had always thought Beijing was merely a less Westernized, more correct pronunciation of the same word. Instead it's Leningrad vs St. Petersburg.

Dinners were great in Beijing. My favorite was at a restaurant called the "Duck and the Dark". It was a microbrewery and restaurant, recommended to us by an Australian colleague. It specialized in Peking duck, and had an entire duck menu, along with a supplemental menu. The duck menu included duck feet, duck liver, duck brains, duck tripe, and other parts of the duck I have no wish to encounter. We three were on our own, escaped from the main body of our colleagues, and ordered by pointing to interesting dishes on other tables. The hardest part was to get the waiter to understand that we wanted a beer the color of the one on *that* table, but of a size like the one on *that other* table. We eventually drank what we were given; the dark beer was very good. The jellyfish was not that great, but we all ate some anyway.

Day 5 - Meetings end, and the Forbidden City

If you're going to buddy up to co-workers, make sure one of them is a Vice President. The Friday meetings were petering out, with no clear end in sight. Due to be over at noon, half past that, the wrapping up hadn't started, but nothing more was being accomplished. One of our three, however, was the VP in charge. He caused assignments to be made, and declared it over. And so we had an afternooon to visit the Forbidden City.

End of Part I (to be continued in China on Bus)

Embarrassing Suitcases:

Joe & Edie Reveal All

—Joe

We travel a bit and occasionally we buy too many things to fit in our bags. Then we find a cheap luggage store and get a travel bag. Last time, Edie got a *little* bit of yarn -- balls of yarn the size of bowling balls. Yes, they compress but only so much! So we got a cheap duffel in Northern Ireland. The company that started the rollaboard type bags, TravelPro, has its headquarters not too far from us. They sell refurbished bags at bargain prices. I have gone over there and picked up one or two items. Anyway, we have accumulated a variegated set of miscellaneous luggage. Sort of our luggage store in the attic.

Fen and relatives about to travel sometimes don't have just the right bag they need for their trip. They come to *Edie & Joe's Miscellania* to borrow a bag. Obviously we have them. And we really don't mind loaning one out now and again. But don't you ever get into one of those perverse moods when you just need to pick on somebody?

Well, ours came up when Adam-Troy Castro was over and asked if he could borrow a small suitcase. Preferable one he could carry on board and preferably one that was a rollaboard and preferably one that wouldn't embarrass him by its colorful design or get him caught in customs because we left a package of suspicious computer cables and wires in its pockets. Picky, wasn't he?

Edie pulled out her black TravelPro under seat rollaboard (which incidentally was a birthday gift to me five years ago). I've used it exactly twice. It's nearly worn out from all of Edie's trips.

Adam thought it would be OK and asked to check the inside. Edie asked if he wanted her to take out her emergency things from the side pocket. Adam was saying no as she unzipped it but he quickly changed it to "Yes. Please!" as he saw it was filled with Tampax.

We're not sure why he was so embarrassed. Did he think a customs official would sneak into the domestic flight area and open his bag in plain view of the other passengers? Would the officer exclaim "What perverted activities do you engage in with these tampons, Mr. Castro?" Did Adam think his bag would fall off the curb and pop open and then the inside zipper would slide open and the tampons would be strewn across the street in front of the hotel where it would be known that he was the only Nebula nominated author to still use

Tampax. (OK, it's an slight exaggeration but I don't want to hear what Connie Willis or Nancy Kress use.)

Anyway, it was the inspiration for our:

Ten Things To Leave in Your Suitcase to Embarrass Your Friends

- leather brassiere and handcuffs
- a John Norman novel
- surgical rubber gloves
- a Richard Geis novel with the pages stuck together
- skull & crossbones temporary tattoos
- Slash fiction
- a comic book novelization
- horse condoms
- WSFS Inc. membership card (only for smofs)
- flyer for an "adult" SF convention
- Philip Jose Farmer's masterpiece *Blown*
- *The Faker's Guide to the Middle Ages* (for our SCA buddies)
- flyer for Dragoncon

and, of course,

- Tampax (after that day maybe this should be number one)

OK, so it's more than ten. No one ever accused us of accuracy.

What would you hide in the suitcase?

DINNER WITH EDIES

- EDIE

An Unusual Dinner

I've just returned from a most unusual dinner. It started several weeks ago when I had a message on the answering machine from an Edie Greenspan. I didn't know any Edie Greenspan. She was cold calling all the Edies she could find (and the Ediths, Edythes, and one lone Edee) and inviting them to dinner. There were Edies from the temple directory, from the music guild, from the Boca Pointe directory and who knows where else. EdieG had decided that a dinner party of Edies would be novel and entertaining, and so she set out to have one.

I must admit that my first thought was of scams and con artists, but my second was of curiosity. I gave a wishy-washy acceptance, wrote it on the calendar, and forgot about it. Between invitation and dinner date I ended up in New York twice, and Washington, D.C., once. I'd totally forgotten about the Edie dinner until yesterday, when Edie G called to remind me and give me directions to the Boca Pointe Country Club.

Well, I went. I almost stayed at work and blew it off, but I've been feeling the lack of nearby female friends and thought that just maybe this could be the start of something. Also, for someone with a lousy memory for names, the thought of being absolutely certain that I was calling everyone by the RIGHT name was seductive. I went, and met five very different ladies.

Now, if this seems the setup for a long drawn out novel of female relationships, across class lines, and generations, you are welcome to write it up. I was the youngest by at least twenty years, having come by our name only by way of immigrant parents.

Edie Greenspan turned out to be in her late sixties, early seventies, a tennis playing, aerobics sort of ex-phys ed teacher who's the vice president of the Temple Sisterhood, is on the funding committee for the Music Guild, does student teacher observation in the classroom for the local university and has cancer. She was very anxious that everyone had a good time, liked the food, and enjoyed themselves. She's a widow, and I think lonely.

We had an Edie who was slim and elegant. Her significant other of 14 years was in hospice, and this was her night out. He had been in the same nursing home as her mother before the hospice, and she had gone from wing to wing to be with them. This Edie works a little, and takes a lot of classes. She's been learning Hebrew for eight years. One of her daughters lives in Tel Aviv.

The rabbi's wife was a little older. As the conversation turned, she wanted to make sure everyone knew that she was *retired*, and NOT at dinner as the rabbi's wife. What do rabbi's wives go

through? I didn't attend high school, but this part felt very high school to me. She so wanted not to be excluded from anything. I think perhaps she had spent a lot of years as an appendage, and now her first and favorite comment was that she was old enough to do what she wanted, and be what she wanted. I suspect the rabbi is a cranky sort. She was an Edythe.

The third Edie doesn't stand out in memory. She was of an age with the rest, and knew EdieG from tennis. In fact, she said, she had tennis friends, and bridge friends, but it was so hard to make just friends for everything. She was also a country club member. All but the rabbi's wife and I were members of the country club. This Edie is learning the computer, with trepidation, but determination. I encouraged her.

The last Edie besides me was a pip. She was lovely, with either extremely fortunate skin or a good face lift. (Not catty, just curious. The facelift part didn't even occur to me until I was on the way home.) This Edie introduced herself as an artist, and an astrologer. She asked me my sun sign. Of our six, there was a Sagittarius, a Leo (me), and 4 Gemini's. She mostly held back from the conversation, smiling in what I took to be either boredom, or an oracular preamble. The new age broke through only a couple times, primarily with the observation that it was astrologically correct that at this time JFK, Jr., would die, as it was the time for the passing of kings and leaders. Apparently, Clinton and his affair with the not-so-divine Miss M were also astrologically correct, as was the death of the king of Jordan. I asked her what Arafat's birthday was. She didn't know.

I tried to be charming, with my usual minimal success. I told travelers tales, and answered all questions. Almost all of us had been born in Brooklyn. Most of us had not met any other Edies before. The impression I had was that most of them had not had a career, and were glad that such existed. I gave out my card to two who asked. (I hope it doesn't turn out to be a scam).

It was strange. I don't think it will be repeated, although EdieG tried to entice everyone to tea at another country club (she's a member of several). I don't think this crowd will become close friends of mine. I'll have to keep looking. This is the first time I've been in a pack of women of that age that were friendly to me (as opposed to friendly with my mom, and putting up with me). They seemed much the same as any other group of women, perhaps with the types easier to pick out as they were emphasized by age. I was told years ago that as we age, we don't change. We only get *more so*.

A most curious dinner. I did find out that there's a conservation law in effect for the knowledge of names -- knowing all the first names, I've now forgotten the last.

The Wall Really Does Go Ever Onward:

