

THE ODYSSEY

Enticed by the idea of a world without borders, **Pauline Bewick** journeyed to China with her daughter, Poppy. Her immersion in Chinese culture proved inspirational and, in her exclusive diary for LIFE, she reveals the series of events and incidents that ultimately resulted in the stunning artwork on these pages

The journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet — Tao Te Ching

Taoism, Chinese art, prawns and bamboo all made me want to go to China. The opportunity came through the International Women's Forum, which was to hold its World Conference in Hong Kong and China. The title, "World Without Borders" has huge appeal to me, as I believe the world will benefit from being without borders. "If you book the tours, Poppy, we'll have a great time there."

We arrived at Hong Kong airport, full of masked people (illustrations A and B) frightened of swine flu. At midnight in the Marriott Hotel (C), Poppy announced she felt sick. We both imagined that we would create havoc and that the hotel would have to be quarantined, but Dr Kung laughed at our worries and told us she just had acute gastro-enteritis. His treatment worked instantly. The following morning we were on a pre-conference tour with six IWF members to see Guilin and the countryside of China.

Guilin: built of hardboard and cardboard, it seemed. The only solid building was our glamorous hotel with a jewelled lift. Rain had swelled the Lee River, and Chinese men in coolie hats with plastic bags over their shoulders were sweeping the pools of water with hand-made brooms from the hotel steps. The bus took us six miles through rice fields, coming to the tallest conical-shaped mountains (D1 and, with Poppy, D2), reaching like fingers into the sky, mist swirling between the dark trees growing to the top. The boat had two decks, and we took our table seat with a long counter of traditional Chinese foods (E), steaming rice, sweet osmanthus, and snake wines. I sketched as we went along the swollen river (F); one page after another was filled with wet indigo watercolour (G). Long bamboo rafts came alongside our boat, with young people holding jade pieces for us to buy. I emptied my container of paint-water over the side, unaware they were below.

Mighty bamboo trees bent their heads like swans; waterfalls gushed creamy white froth. The occasional temple set in the wet jungle (H), and a tent pitched on a field of cows. With black cormorants tied by their throats to the fisherman's bamboo raft, he sat with his coolie hat keeping off the rain, waiting for his cormorants to catch him fish, which they could not swallow because of the tight band on their necks.

We pass a mountain with white horses



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carved by nature on to its cliff face. We stop to inspect stalls of dried black ants. "It is good for making your hair black." Scorched whole chickens, bone hair-combs and, to my delight, a stall of artists' brushes made of mouse hair, wolf, mink and goat (I — *Li River Guilin*; painting).

The mist thickened to a dense grey-white before we got back to our hotel. That night, some of us go to a Chinese opera. Between the front seats were tables for people to eat their dinner. In the interval, acrobats tumbled like Nijinsky around the stage. A man hung two buckets full of water from his

eyelids. The story of the opera was that of a beautiful woman who lived among the Guilin conical mountains (J — *Guilin Legend*; painting). I still cannot get out of my mind the influence that Guilin had on my paintings. If only, at the exhibition of my work, I could have a little button to press and you could hear the meowing, high-pitched voices singing their haunting legends.

The next day we were taken to the Reed Flute Caves. Limestone stalagmites and stalactites form shapes of forests, castles and buddhas. Then we climb to Longsheng, rain and mist hiding the rice-paddy mountains

(K). Our legs ached as we went up, up and up the steps, eventually stopping to have lunch beneath hanging red lanterns looking out to the pagoda-like tall houses (L). On the balcony of one, a young woman was bent over combing her long, long shiny black hair (M). "We are only allowed cut our hair two times in our life." She then twisted it and coiled it around her head, securing it with a bone comb.

It was time to go back to Hong Kong for the IWF meeting. The bus splashed through deep muddy water to the airport, stopping off at the pearl shop where we were given a