

NEW ORLEANS AT DAWN • GLENN CLOSE • NEW ZEALAND'S MAGICAL HONEY

# Hemispheres

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AUGUST 2018

Where you can get in the right frame of mind at the meditative Red Brick Art Museum, which boasts masonry almost as dazzling as the art on display

Three  
Perfect  
Days

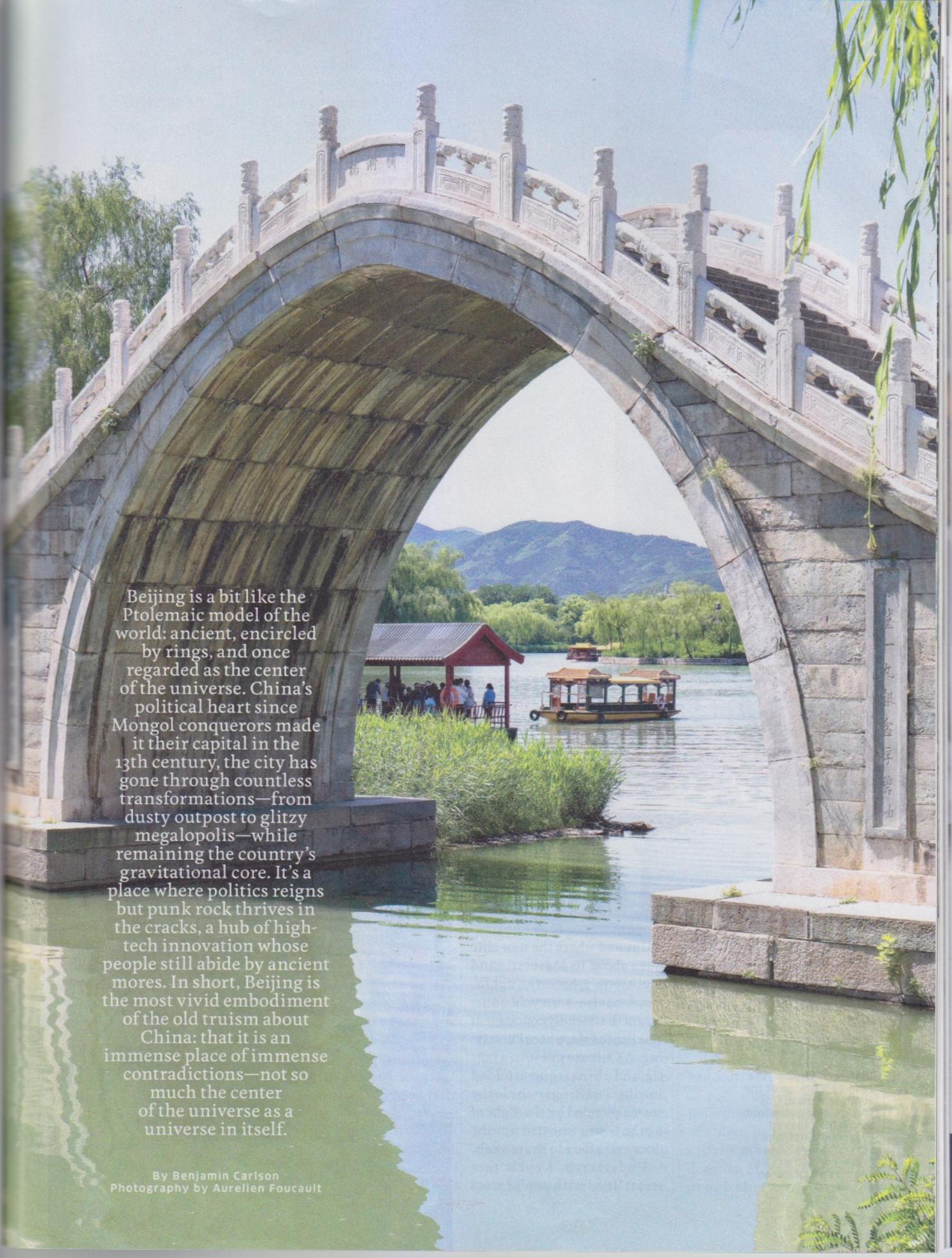
# Beijing



Three Perfect Days

# Beijing



A large, multi-arched stone bridge spans across a body of water. The bridge is constructed from grey stone blocks and features ornate railings with decorative finials. The central arch is the largest and most prominent. In the background, a traditional Chinese pavilion with a red roof sits on a small island. Several boats are visible on the water. The scene is set against a backdrop of green trees and distant mountains under a clear sky. The water reflects the bridge and the surrounding landscape.

Beijing is a bit like the Ptolemaic model of the world: ancient, encircled by rings, and once regarded as the center of the universe. China's political heart since Mongol conquerors made it their capital in the 13th century, the city has gone through countless transformations—from dusty outpost to glitzy megalopolis—while remaining the country's gravitational core. It's a place where politics reigns but punk rock thrives in the cracks, a hub of high-tech innovation whose people still abide by ancient mores. In short, Beijing is the most vivid embodiment of the old truism about China: that it is an immense place of immense contradictions—not so much the center of the universe as a universe in itself.

By Benjamin Carlson  
Photography by Aurelien Foucault

DAY

1

## ► From the Forbidden City to the wild contemporary art scene

Opening spread, from left: the Hall of Good Harvests in the Temple of Heaven; the Jade Belt Bridge at the Summer Palace; this spread, clockwise from top right: a carved dragon, a moat, and a portrait of Mao Zedong at the Forbidden City; vendors on Qianmen commercial street

If Beijing has a magnetic pole, it's here: a mile east of the Forbidden City, where emperors once rode in palanquins and where the new elite buzz about in Maseratis and McLarens. I, however, opt for two wheels—a bicycle courtesy of the friendly concierge at **The Peninsula**, where I'm staying. A Chinese guest in a bow tie and rhinestone-studded sneakers waiting in the lobby seems puzzled by the sight of a bike being wheeled out the door and offers to share a cab.

Undeterred, I cycle to a street lined with poplar trees

and rose bushes, where I soon find myself surrounded by people pedaling in the same direction, including a fleet of six beefy men on identical blue bikes. I take a right-hand turn and the road widens. This is Chang'an Avenue (aka Eternal Peace Street), a 10-lane stretch running between Tiananmen Square and the **Forbidden City**. I pull over beside a huge portrait of Mao Zedong, intrigued by the scale of the image and by Mao's orange-ish skin tone, like a bad spray-tan. "No stopping," a nearby guard suggests in Mandarin. "Keep moving!"

Once I make it through the block-long line for security at the Forbidden City, I head into a waiting area, where a vendor stands over a pile of gold hats with built-in pigtailed. I ask if they are for eunuchs, and he frowns. "Only emperors wear those. We don't sell hats for eunuchs!"

The Forbidden City—with its gargantuan Hall of Supreme Harmony and 180 acres of courtyards, palaces, and majestic golden-capped

*"The Forbidden City, with its majestic golden-capped pavilions, was designed to shock and awe."*

pavilions—was designed to shock and awe. Even today, in a city bristling with extravagant skyscrapers, it does the job. I pass into the inner sanctum, a courtyard that used to be off-limits to everyone but the emperor. After a minute alone in this vast and strangely discomfiting space, I edge toward a provincial tour group, just for the company.

By the time I leave—the Forbidden City is like Ikea: You have to walk through the whole thing to get out—I'm not only humbled but famished. For lunch, I've arranged to meet American expat Patrick Rhine, the director of research at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, at the small Hunanese





restaurant **Blessed Events**. The air inside is sour and pungent. I ask Rhine about the smell, and he replies, “What smell?” When my order of rice noodles and pork arrives, I understand: The bowl is full of fermented pickles. They are, I find, much more pleasant in the mouth than the nose. The pork chunks are sweet and fatty, the rice



noodles slippery, the soup hot and sour.

Afterward, we wander over to **Art District 798**, a block of Bauhaus-style factories that’s been refurbished into a hub of quirky shops, high-minded galleries, and bizarre installations. “This place used to be a lot cheesier—lots of overpriced, tacky chinoiserie,” Rhine says as we walk through the complex. “There are at least three ocarina shops within 100 meters of us now, and I don’t know why.”

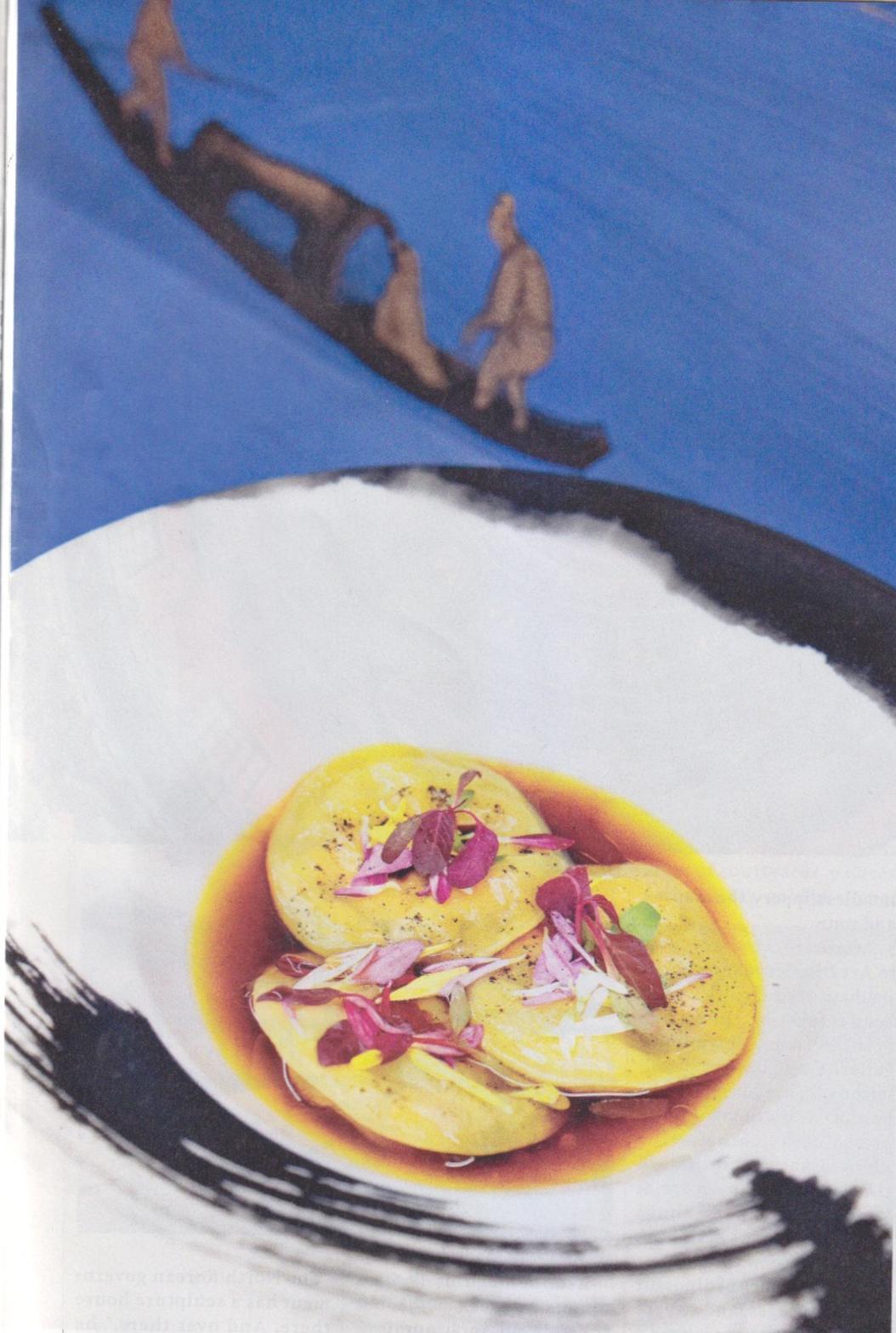
We pass a stack of dinosaur statues in cages, and a space where an artist has jabbed a potato with a bent fork and placed it in a bowl. “It’s a commentary on the failure of Western culture, I think,” explains a nice young lady in octagonal spectacles. She points to a dish filled with dark liquid and two clay beads. “This one’s called *Bubba and Forrest Go Home*.”



It can be tough to tell what’s tongue-in-cheek at 798, but there is no such ambiguity across the street at **China Cow Parade Park**, which sells weird cow statues and displays a wall-size, military-style map showing the shop’s 10-year plan for carpeting China in stores. “There’s weird, random stuff constantly going on,” Rhine says. He points to a blocked-off side street.

“The North Korean government has a sculpture house there. And over there,” he points again, “the other week they had pig wrestling.”

I bid Rhine goodbye and head off to another section of 798, where the **M Woods** museum is showing an exhibit of videos by the Los Angeles artist Paul McCarthy. At the door, an attendant demands proof that I’m 18—and I



From left:  
duck foie gras ravioli  
at Jing; the restaurant's  
lavish entrance

quickly realize why, upon seeing the transgressive, adult-only works. Time to call it a day.

For dinner, I'm off to **Jing**, the Peninsula hotel's elegantly subdued French restaurant. The brainchild of chef Julien Cadiou, brought to

Beijing by way of Hong Kong, it offers exquisite renditions of dishes tailored to the comfort food-oriented palate of China. I order wildly: wasabi bigeye tuna and wagyu beef tartare with quail egg yolk; duck foie gras ravioli in vegetal consommé; a succulent lobster



cavatelli; chicken thigh with a mushroom-foam garnish and a hazelnut red wine reduction.

In need of a nightcap, I order a cocktail at **The Lobby** lounge. A waiter brings a Manhattan as a jazz band takes the stage. "I wish you bluebirds in the spring," the alto sings, looking me in the eye. "I set you free-e-e-e."

I take that as my cue to go to bed.

## ON THE COVER



## Brick by Brick

The Chaoyang District's Red Brick Art Museum elevates its namesake building material to the level of the contemporary Chinese and international art inside. The galleries, porthole tunnels, and garden spaces offer a respite from the crowded capital. *Traveling this month?*

Post a [#hemigram](#) of your favorite architectural landmark.

DAY

# 2

► Old-school alleyways, an epic food tour, and a hard-rock dungeon

It's morning, and I'm walking through **Baochao Hutong**, a leafy alleyway that feels like a time capsule. I watch a woman pulling laundry along a line while another empties a bucket with a soft splash. The cry of a knife-sharpener echoes through the alley. I stop at a roadside cart for a Shandong-style *jianbing*, a fresh-made crepe with a filling of spicy egg, pickled vegetables, and spring onions.

Centuries ago, camel trains used to end their journey from central Asia in these dusty streets. Now,

scooters zip by on the pavement, but the ambience is otherwise unchanged. **The Drum Tower** (or *Gulou*, pronounced "goo-low") still stands at the center of the city's biggest unbroken *hutong* block, a labyrinth of picturesque alleyways that date to the 13th-century Yuan dynasty and are dotted with traditional courtyard homes. Passing piled bicycles and half-open doors, I encounter four elderly aunties and an uncle in a Panama hat who are seated on stools, watching the *hutong* as if it were TV. I wave hello, and they watch impassively, much as you would if a TV character waved.

I soon understand why they spend their days watching the street. An old man walks by swinging two cages with shrieking parakeets; a girl in a watermelon crinoline dress poses for a cameraman while her friend in a lemon crinoline dress adjusts her bangs. Nearby, a little boy in split-bottom pants draws a chalkspaceship on the ground. His mother asks, "Do you love to eat?" He thinks a moment and replies, "I love to eat meat buns!" A man, dusted shoulder-to-knuckles in flour, makes pancakes with split hot dogs on a round griddle.

I wend my way to the Drum Tower, the imposing

15th-century structure where servants used to beat the hours. (Now, 10-minute demonstrations happen throughout the day.) A sunny flagstone

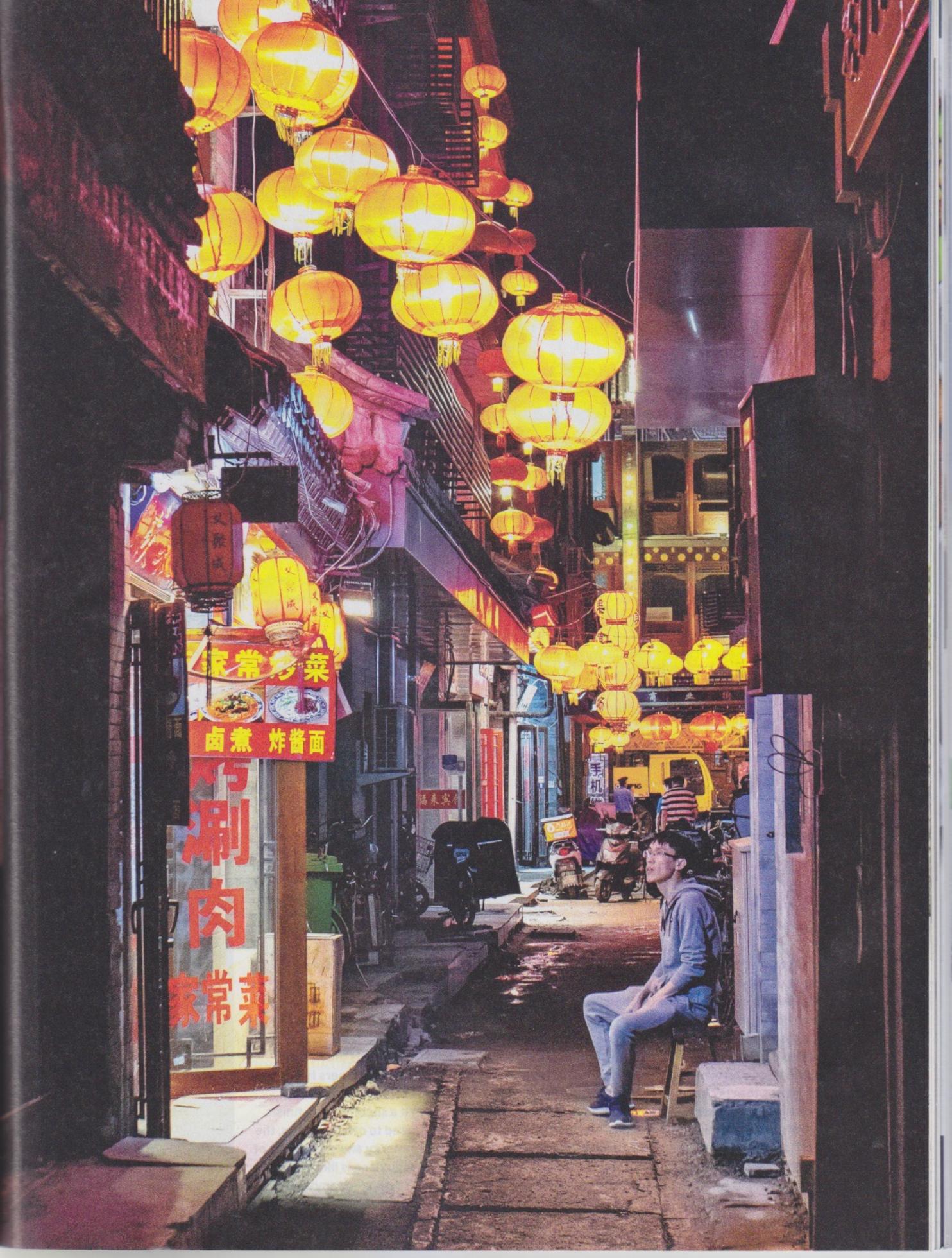
*"Camel trains used to end their journey from central Asia in these dusty streets. Now, scooters zip by on the pavement."*

plaza stretches between the lantern-shaped building and its humbler mate, the Bell Tower.

On Gulou Street, which skirts the south side of the tower, the atmosphere changes; the alleys give way to a strip of fashionable cafés and bars. A pink-haired girl in goth schoolgirl attire marches into a shop specializing in vampire paraphernalia. A tattooed man rushes by clutching a mandolin. Outside a guitar store, a group of overheated guys roll their shirts up to expose their bellies—the Beijing bikini—causing a young hipster couple to hop off the sidewalk to avoid them.



From the duck foie at Jing, the lavish entrance



家常炒菜  
卤煮 炸酱面  
涮肉  
家常菜

手机



From here, I catch a cab to the diplomatic district, Sanlitun. Less punk-rock than Gulou, this once-seedy bar district is where the smart set

From left: modern towers along the Landmark River; the Zhengyangmen, a gate in the city's historic wall

now goes to eat American barbecue and shop at the Apple store. I get a table at **Moka Bros**, a health-food eatery in a multistory plaster edifice that feels like a slice of Barcelona. While sipping a flaxseed and beet smoothie and nibbling a radish-salmon poke bowl with lime-ponzu sauce, I eavesdrop on a Westerner in wraparound shades speaking Mandarin to his girlfriend: "That's how



you earn money. It's not bad or good—it's just how it works."

After lunch, I stroll a quiet street lined with neon pink and lavender flower boxes, then head into LLJ Jiaji Zhan, a storefront with more than 50 claw machines filled with dolls and stuffed animals. One has a zombie boy named "My Immortal Buddy." Another offers "Gon's Marmot." The machines don't

accept cash, only payments through scanned QR codes, so I settle for watching a slew of kids vie for prizes.

For more fun, I head off to Wujin—or "Hardware Store"—a tiny, 10-person space that's part indie bookstore and part restaurant and is hosting a zine launch. As I sip a spicy ginger carrot juice, I strike up a conversation with a platinum-haired

## MORE ON HUTONGS

### Baochao

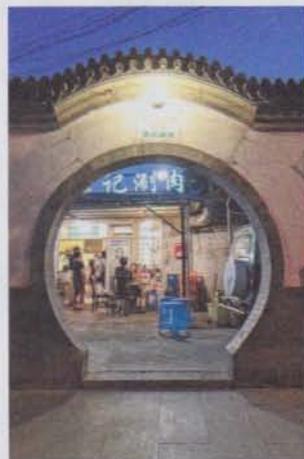
A pleasant hybrid of sleepy residences and lively cafés, Baochao (pictured) embodies the alluringly dual personality of the *hutongs*. By day, it bustles with old-school dumpling shops, and by night it draws hip crowds to artsy bars like the French-inspired jazz spot Modernista. It's a great jumping-off point for exploring the tiny alleys around the Drum Tower.

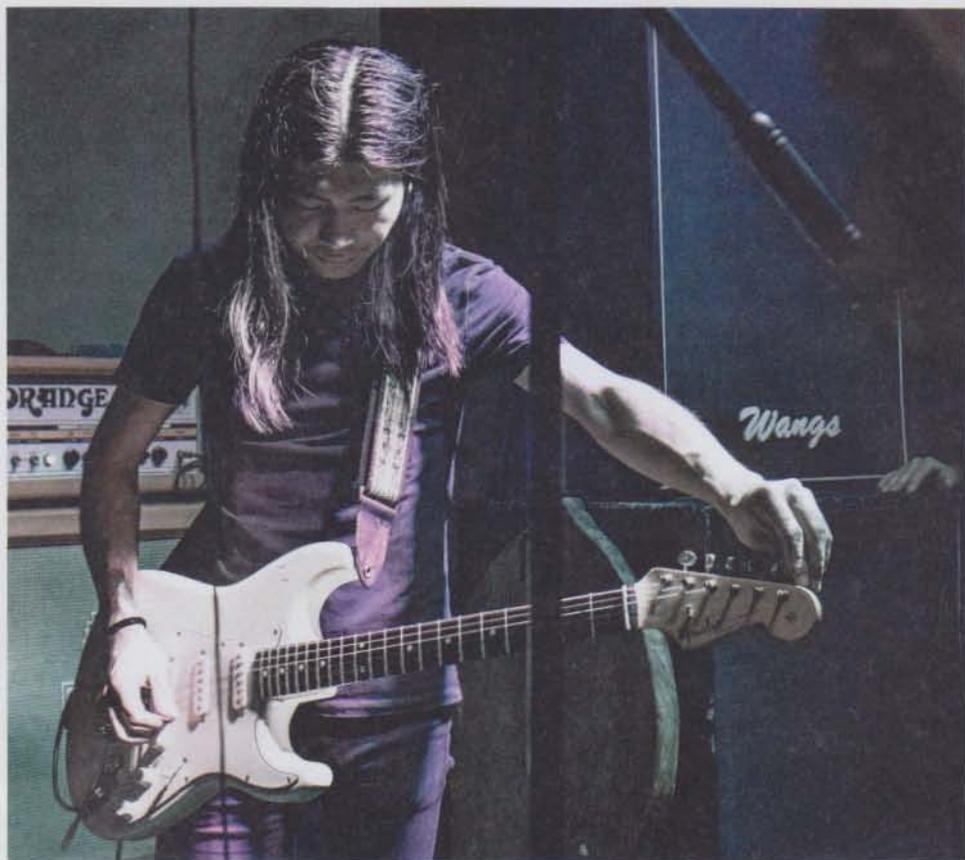
### Zhong Jianzi

A slow stroll past the bustling produce stalls here is a feast for the senses. Dozens of vendors display fresh fruit and vegetables carted in daily from the countryside, showcasing the stunning plenty of China—from knobbly bitter melons to 14 varieties of peaches, cherries, and grapes. It's a time capsule that has become vanishingly rare in this ever-modernizing capital.

### Nanluoguxiang

If Universal Studios were a *hutong*, it would be this one. A buzzing, raucous lane of bright knickknack shops and sellers of snacks—beware the pig tripe—this is the *hutong* Chinese day-trippers flock to. While some remodeling has given it a slightly tacky finish compared to other *hutongs*, the sheer energy and excitement of Nanluoguxiang is like nothing else in Beijing—or anywhere.





*"In Beijing, you'll see a three-wheeled Jetsons-like vehicle made to transport a ton of Pomeranians."*

expat named Kendra Schaefer. Over a decade ago, she accepted a bet from her father to go to a monastery in rural China to study Shaolin kung fu (despite speaking no Mandarin), and she now works here as a web designer. She tells me she loves this city for its "surrealism": "In Beijing, you walk out your door and trip over a guy with a three-wheeled Jetsons-like vehicle he made in his yard to transport a ton of Pomeranians."

I'm all kitsched-out, and it's time for dinner. I've signed up for a local food tour, *Lost Plate*, which meets by the Lama Temple, the city's most spectacular

Buddhist sanctuary. Dating to the 18th century, it's the largest Tibetan holy site outside of Tibet. The roof tiles blaze gold in the setting sun. Pilgrims in crimson robes shuffle out, debating where to eat.

Luckily, I don't have to worry about that. Outside the temple I spot the *Lost Plate* guide, an energetic young woman from Hubei named Icy, and a group of tourists from around the world.



**Clockwise from top:** a rock musician tunes up at Temple Bar; the boutique Brickyard hotel; a few of the many traditional dishes enjoyed during a *Lost Plate* tour

Leading us toward a trio of waiting tuk-tuks, Icy opens a cooler filled with cans of beer: "Who's thirsty?"

I ride in a tuk-tuk with a Danish couple, who rave about

the food scene in their country. "Sometimes it's too trendy, though," the woman says. "One day I was eating a cake, and inside it had ants."

The evening is a swirl of splendid hole-in-the-wall eateries. We eat hot Hubei noodles with pickled veggies in a teddy bear-themed restaurant, Mongolian hotpot in an unmarked shop, and a deep-fried hamburger nicknamed "the doornail," due to its resemblance to the Forbidden City's huge brass door studs.

Belly full, I bid farewell to Icy and the Danish gourmants and go to *Temple Bar*, a dive known for its cheap drinks and loud shows. A staple of Beijing's heavy metal scene, it has a dungeony feel, with steel floors and black walls. Two chalkboards list dozens of \$4 cocktails: Super Mario, Brain Teaser, Red Lobster. A band breaks into a set of prog-rock jams. Three locals in paisley shirts, one on a crutch, approach the stage and attempt to dance to the angular rhythms. A girl in what appears to be a pink clown outfit begins to sway. I think about something Schaefer said to me earlier: "In Beijing, you never have to make your own fun."

Very true, but now it's time for me to head to the *Brickyard*, a boutique hotel an hour north of the city center. I have a big day planned and could use a full night's sleep.



DAY

# 3

## ► The Great Wall, a grand market, and baijiu with an ice cream chaser

I'm woken at dawn by sunlight blazing through floor-to-ceiling windows. Fortunately, the view is stunning: green-carpeted mountains, rolled out in layers of translucent color, like a Renaissance painting. Scrolling across the top is an undulating gray wall. Yes, that wall.

The Great Wall was the edge of the ancient Chinese world. Beyond this barrier, emperors believed, the world descended into chaos and barbarism. Construction started in 220 BC and

continued intermittently over 13 dynasties. Today, the structure winds some 5,500 miles, from the east of China to the lands of the Silk Road in the west. This section, near **Beigou**, a picturesque village shaded by chestnut trees, dates back more than 400 years, when it was constructed at phenomenal expense to keep Manchu invaders at bay. (It failed, of course: The Manchus swept through gaps in the wall and conquered Beijing in 1644, making the Wall the most magnificent monument to failed intentions in human history.)

Pocketing a banana for breakfast, I set off to get a closer look. After a short walk past Beigou's manicured courtyard homes, I begin the ascent. It's a straight shot up from the town square to Mutianyu, a pretty, well-kept portion of the Great Wall. After climbing for an hour, exhausted and sticky, I pause under a tree and silently fume at a couple as they climb into an air-conditioned car they hired to ferry them up. I briefly consider a *Lord of the Flies*-style attack; barbarism and chaos already feel close at hand.

On the last stretch, the path grows steep and rocky. Then, just as I'm contemplating sitting down and refusing to move ever again, the trees part, and I am at the base of the wall. I try to enter a watchtower on the wall via a doorway, only to find that it is welded shut. A burly police officer leads me to another part of the wall, where for a small fee he hoists me over the six-foot-high battlements.

The view from up here is breathtaking. Mountains lie on all sides like coiled serpents, and the wall rises and falls in defiance of gravity, with one section soaring like an M.C. Escher staircase to a gatehouse 150 feet above us. Gazing up, I see two terrified tourists descending it on their bottoms. One good look

*"Green-carpeted mountains roll out in layers. Scrolling across the top is an undulating gray wall. Yes, that wall."*

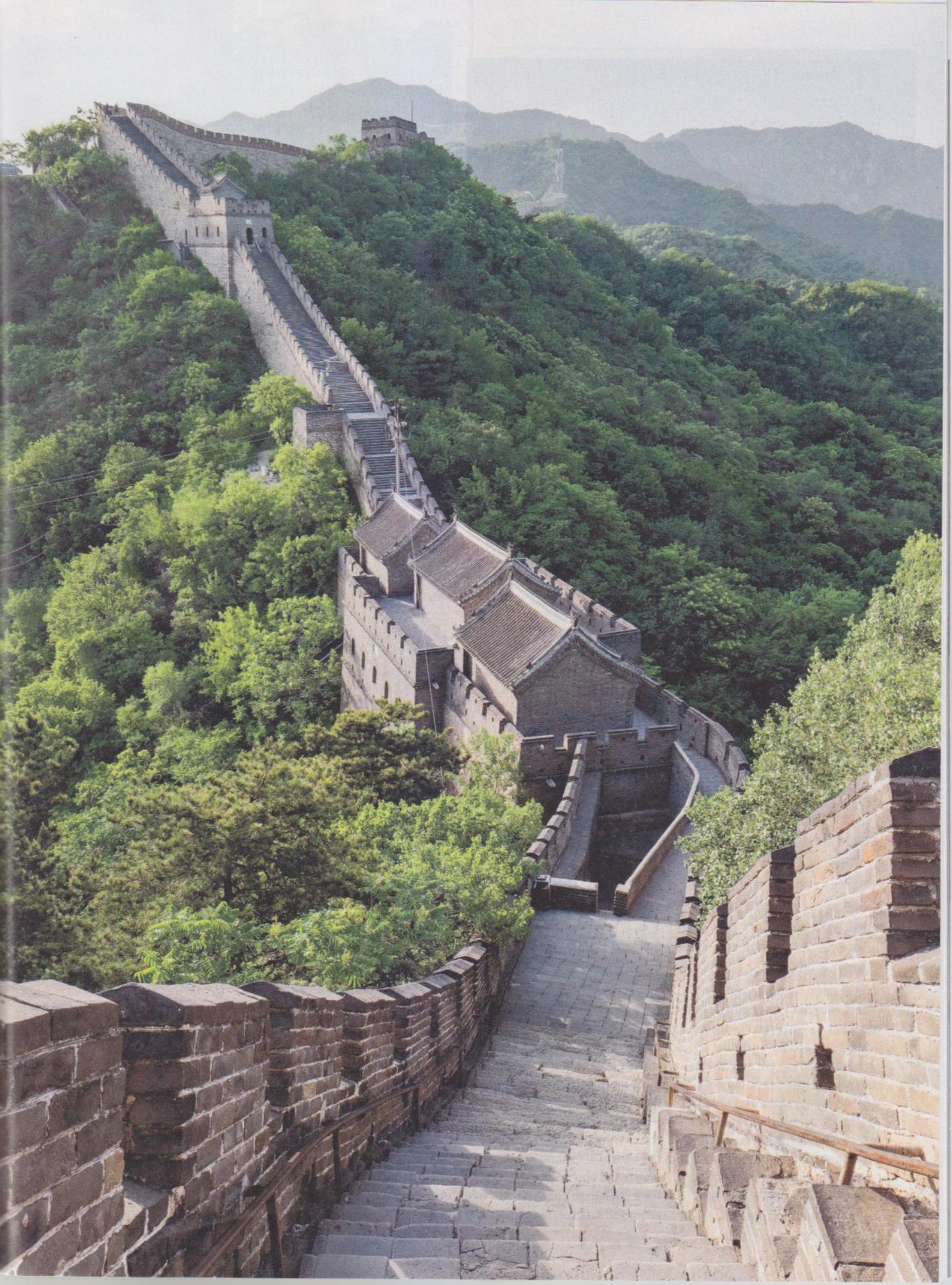
at the mountains surrounding us, and it's clear why the wall failed: Any barbarians who got this high would not be stopped by an extra 10 feet of brick. Still, it's a spectacular piece of superfluous engineering.

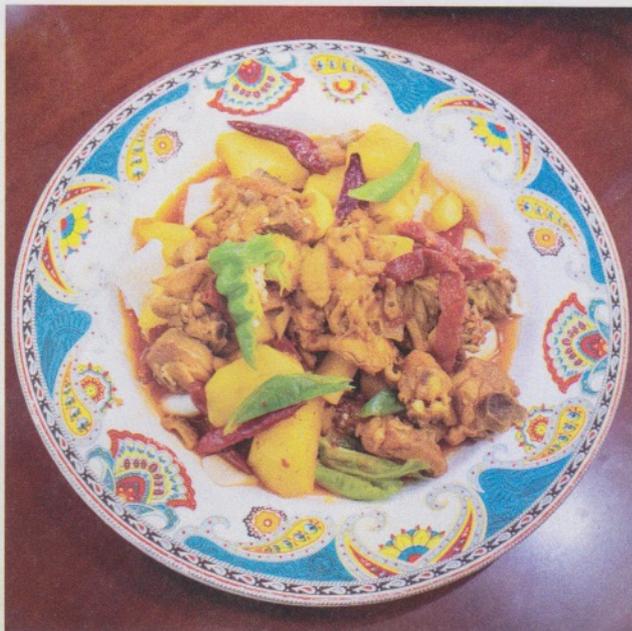
Tourists gasp in five languages around me; a little Chinese boy, fearless, does a dance routine by the crenelated edge while his mother films him. A man works the controller for a drone that whines above us. A scholarly fellow gazes at the landscape and, with an air of profundity, spits into the abyss. On the way down, men from the village carefully sweep the "forbidden" path with grass brooms.

Lunch is back at the Brickyard. Raj, the hotel manager, seats me in the courtyard, where I can admire the mountain I've just climbed. Out comes a bowl of cabbage and black chestnuts with roasted pork, then a brie salad garnished with green raisins from Xinjiang. Then comes rainbow trout, succulent and bold, with fried garlic confit and pesto. When Raj offers homemade caramel ice cream, I do not refuse.

Next, it's time for some shopping, at **Panjiayuan**, Beijing's most boisterous bazaar. Located on the city's south side, about an hour and a half from the Great Wall by car, the market is a magnet for antiques collectors—and even more so for those who want cheap replicas. It spreads over several acres and is divided

A section of the Great Wall, built more than 400 years ago to keep out Manchu invaders





From left: Uighur food at Xinjiang Bayi Laoye; the roof of the Orchid, a boutique hotel hidden in a *hutong*

into aisles by specialty: jade bangles, calligraphy, scroll paintings, coins, chests, fans, rocks that look like meat, paintings of Tibetan mastiffs, Communist statuettes, agate beads, dried walnuts shaped like little brains to roll around one's palms for circulation. "Old Marx, Old Mao, Old

Xi, they're three great men!" hollers a vendor selling political paintings. She points at a yellow fan. "Take it to your office—inspire the people around you!"

I decline the offer but decide that all this walking has put me in the mood for an aperitif. A taxi and a tuk-tuk ride later, I'm at **Great Leap Brewing**, nestled in the buzzing *hutong* courtyard of Beijing's original craft beer maker, sipping a Sichuan peppercorn-infused ale. A table of expats nearby raises

a toast to a couple departing the city, and I feel a pang of secondhand nostalgia.

For dinner, I have decided to go west, opting for the cuisine of the Uighur people, the Turkic minority of China who once manned the Silk Road trade routes. The restaurant, **Xinjiang Bayi Laoye**, is massive, garish, and packed. The decor calls to mind a sort of central Asian Turkish Caesars Palace: a glitzy front desk, amber crystal chandeliers, faux stained glass windows. The ceiling is painted with the Milky Way.

I befriend an American factory manager who is traveling to Shandong to negotiate the sale of boiler fittings. We order a series of dishes: big-plate chicken, noodle squares, lamb on rosewood skewers, and heaps of WuSu beer. Even the teapot, filled with subtle cardamom-flavored tea, has a sort of Atlantic City extravagance: It resembles a big brass turtle shell.

I briefly join a group of boisterous young men shouting "Bottoms up!" over shots of *baijiu*, the potent liquor of choice in northern China. (It's actually the best-selling liquor in the world.) I down a glass, and the burn in my throat spells instant regret.



## WHERE TO STAY

### The Peninsula

In a city where new buildings are slapped together and torn apart with neck-snapping speed, the pagoda-inspired Peninsula hotel has become a grande dame at the ripe old age of 29. A top-to-bottom renovation completed last year has given it a fresh, sumptuous look, with cheeky modern Chinese art and a swooping marble staircase so opulent that fashion brands use it as a catwalk. *From \$304, [beijing.peninsula.com](http://beijing.peninsula.com)*

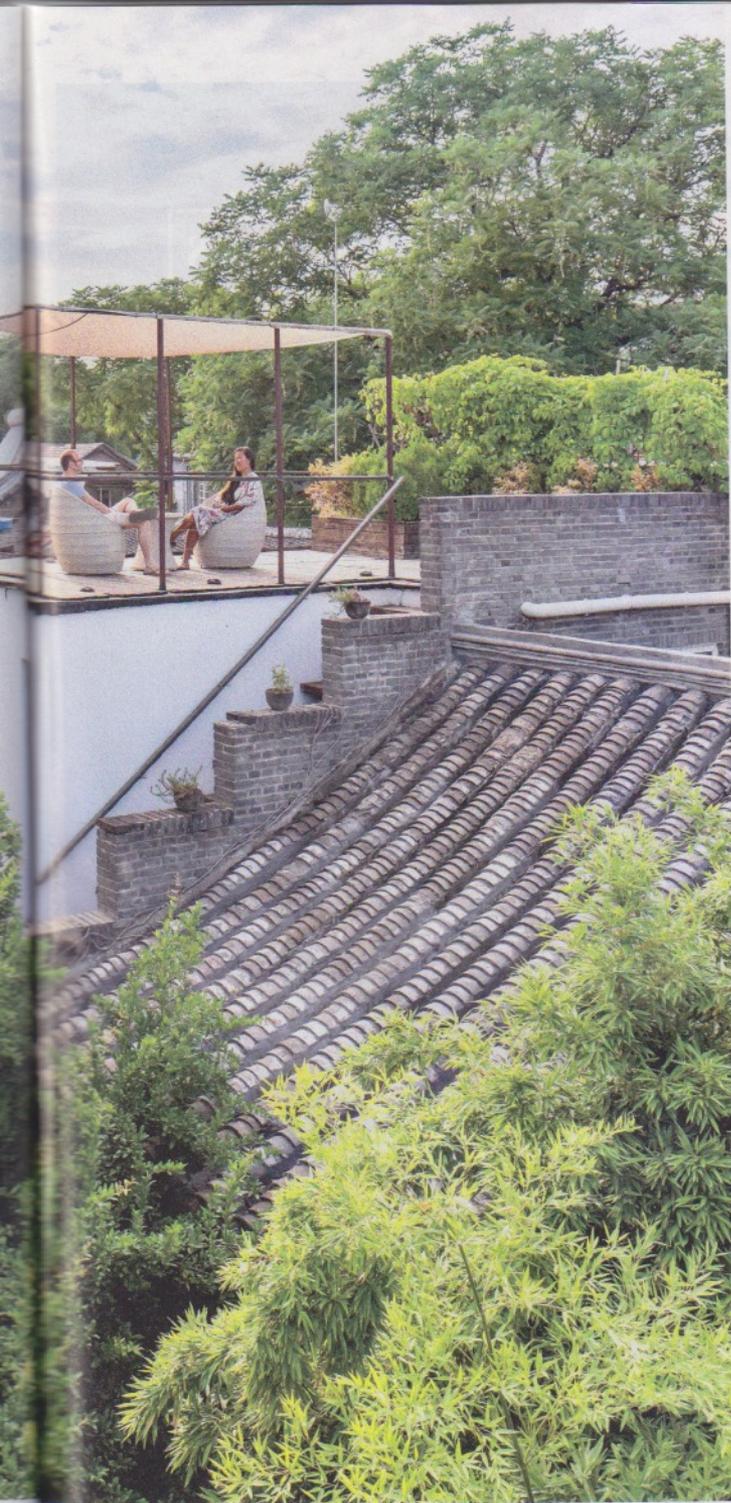
### The Orchid

Nestled in the deep recesses of a *hutong* that's barely wide enough for two people to pass, this thoughtfully designed boutique hotel boasts unique terrace rooms and a selection of even more secluded and well-hidden private apartments. It's the best of both worlds for those who want to experience the charm of *hutong* life while also being able to come home for a soak in the bedside hot tub. *From \$108, [theorchidbeijing.com](http://theorchidbeijing.com)*

### Brickyard

The poshest spot in a Great Wall village so picturesque you'll want to pinch yourself, the Brickyard began its life in the 1960s as a glazed-tile factory. It now uses those tiles in Gaudí-esque mosaic walkways and a dazzling rainbow-colored roof. Enjoy the view of the wall from your bed—but be sure to put on the complimentary eyemask before bed, or be prepared to wake up with the sun. *From \$205, [brickyardmutianyu.com](http://brickyardmutianyu.com)*

The evening spirals out to the **Blue Stream Bar**, a short bike ride away. It's a cozy joint by the Drum Tower, a low-beamed single room with wood pillars and an intimate stage. I walk inside looking as if I've had one too many *baijiu* (which is one *baijiu*), get an ice cream, and watch a cross-cultural band take the stage. Someone explains that the band's name,

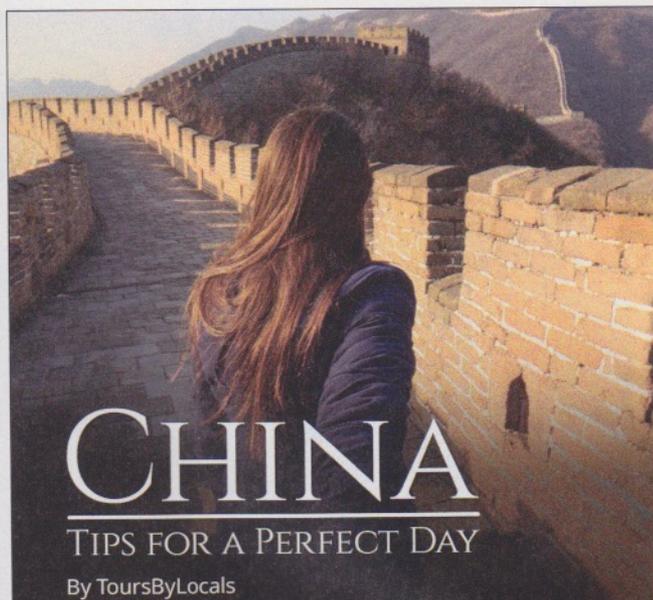


Eluvium, is supposed to represent a cycle of exhaustion and replenishment.

Before long, a petite woman begins hammering out a gnarly pentatonic melody on the *yangqin* dulcimer, while a singer in denim pulls out a keytar and the drum enters with a pounding 7/4 beat. I eat my ice cream thinking about replenishment, as the music

sweeps upward, out past the seventh ring road of Beijing, into the mountains.

**There's nothing forbidden about this city:** Your perfect Beijing day starts with United, on one of the airline's daily nonstop flights from the U.S. to China's capital. Book now at [united.com](http://united.com) or on the United mobile app.



# CHINA

## TIPS FOR A PERFECT DAY

By ToursByLocals

Want to see the places other tourists miss? Spend time with a ToursByLocals guide. Whether you're visiting China or one of the 150 other countries we're in, our guides will have you experiencing your destination as an insider: seeing, learning and doing more. Enjoy discovering more of China with these local tips from our guides.

### Linda, Beijing



Walk slowly down to Tian An Men Square, then take a rickshaw ride through the Beijing Hutongs; the narrow, atmospheric laneways give a glimpse into the city's rich history.

### Victor, Chengdu

When you're done hugging Chengdu's famous pandas, enjoy a cup of tea and a game of mah jong at a traditional Chinese teahouse. I really like Heming in the People's Park.



### Sunny, Shanghai



Shanghai's Old Town Bazaar is a great place for souvenirs, and you can also sample our signature soup dumplings here. Don't miss the elegant Ming Dynasty garden in the heart of the bazaar!

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