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Cycling through China

An expert on explosives



In China getting off the beaten track is the best way to encounter rare and interesting characters. Fred Richardson is an example. A seasoned traveler, he avoids the tourist circuit like the plague. Beijing, Shanghai and the Great Wall — and the tourists that throng them — are not his style.

Richardson has been in and out of China many times over the years. For five years he was married to a Chinese lady, though the relationship went sour and they eventually separated. My first meeting with Fred was pure chance, in a small coffee bar in Xiamen. A good start in the land of tea!

Freshly arrived from the United States of America with a newly printed visa, he was ready to start for Inner Mongolia — in the middle of winter! His credentials state that he's from Washington and an "expert on explosives" among other things. Richardson has written a book on China and his experiences here. It is not a conventional tourist guidebook, rather it is a guide to the process of traveling. It details all the pitfalls of traveling alone in risky places, dealing with people speaking unknown minority languages, avoiding being cheated and how to make friends with the cheaters! He has found a publisher in Beijing and his work will be on the shelves of book stores in 2007.

Richardson had not been long back in China when he had his faithful bicycle stolen just a few blocks from the bicycle factory in Xiamen where he had bought it. In two years his faithful two wheeler had taken him around China, to the United States and had sat in the holds of numerous airlines. Now it had disappeared with a thief. Richardson was sad. The bicycle factory had disappeared and been replaced by a new shopping complex. When he asked a local when it had closed, the only reply he got was, "What bicycle factory?" In fast developing China, memories are short.

Undeterred, Richardson purchased a new bike from a shop, sparkling new, in fact, with 18 gears. The problem was the bicycle looked too new: to be safe, one has to make it appear old. Using a large stone and some dirty old black spray paint, he set to work "destroying the bike", as he put it. Thieves would not

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be interested in this once he was finished. The bicycle was taken apart and reassembled several times, allowing Richardson to get to know every part, every nut and bolt of his new companion. At the end of two weeks, he departed for Beijing atop his the new bicycle. This lasted until Fuzhou, where the comfort of a hard sleeper train bunk seemed much the better way to finish the journey.

He didn't stay long in Beijing. His destination was the isolated Inner Mongolia, where he wanted to visit a Mongolian friend. Once there, he made a new Mongolian friend who had written and published a 400-page English Grammar in Mongolian, so Richardson set to work spiffing up the English examples for a second edition. No help with the grammar was necessary: the writer knew much more English grammar than Richardson.

Life in Inner Mongolia in winter is not easy. The temperature is generally below zero, but with his laptop, bicycle and regular cups of Mongolian milk tea, Richardson found harmony and contentment. Communications with the outside world and stories of his escapades arrived regularly in my inbox.

Life on the go

Richardson left China for a few months to return to the United States and has now returned — again, to pass the winter in the cold north. His travels continue, and now that his new book is going to be published he has to escape the crowds that may follow in his footsteps. The last news I had from him came from a remote area of Xinjiang in the far northwest. His newest faithful bicycle is still with him and several arguments have been provoked by traveling with it on rural public buses to out the way places. Bicycles are for riding, they say, not to be put on buses! His last e-mail arrived a few days ago complaining about the heat of Xinjiang. The temperature is in the 20s Celsius, with winter just around the corner. Global warming must be following him around. Maybe by the time he reaches Guangxi in spring it will be snowing with global cooling. He is now on his way to Xining, on the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai, a good spot to spend some winter time. He likes to visit an English Training Program there. It is for Tibetan students from small places all over the greater Tibetan area. He says it is the most wonderful program he has ever seen!

As for Richardson's bicycle, arguments are the worst it has suffered. Nobody has dared to steal it!

In the next installment, more news and Richardson's departure for Guangxi.

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