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[Back to previous page](#)

In Guangzhou, China, plenty to discover — and to buy

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We pile into the minivan: three adults and four children under the age of 8. We squeeze in a jogging stroller, three Razor scooters and seven bottles of ice water, and we're off.

I've just arrived in Guangzhou, China's third-largest city, and my niece, Jenny, and her family are eager to show me the sights. It's my first trip to China, and I'm their first visitor in the two years since they moved here from Washington for my nephew-in-law's State Department job. No matter that it's dusk.

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My nephew-in-law, Brian O'Connor, parks in a crowded outdoor shopping district — think of New York's Canal Street on steroids — and we emerge like circus clowns with props and squeals and manic American manners.

“Look at this! Look at this!” Brian shouts to the kids, who whiz through the alleys on the Razor scooters, skirting pedestrians, motor scooters and bicycles piled high with cardboard for recycling.

Brightly colored clothing hangs from every vertical surface and is mounded on every horizontal one. Socks, underwear, lingerie, dresses, tank tops, beach towels, pajamas, lace tights, shoes, scarves and hand-painted belt buckles with portraits of President Obama. One shop advertises: “Produce Swimwear Gymsuit.”

Shea, 8, corrals his siblings into a stall that seems to have 1,000 socks. Kiki, 6, pauses to watch a group of women playing mahjong. Finny, 4, wearing a bright green Ireland soccer shirt, narrowly avoids a head-on collision with a guy and his delivery cart. I follow at the rear, camera in hand.

We take pictures of the Chinese, and the Chinese take pictures of us.

“The Chinese people really love children,” Jenny says. “Traveling around with four, we're always greeted with a mixture of surprise and wonder.”

Guangzhou is an overlooked tourist destination. The big glamour cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong attract most travelers, although a subset of American visitors is familiar with the town:

people in the import-export business and couples arriving to adopt a baby through the Consulate General of the United States.

As the mainland's leading manufacturing and commercial hub, Guangzhou hosts the largest trade fair in China — the Canton Fair — twice a year. All those goods that flood big-box stores in the United States have gotta come from somewhere, and with more than 55,000 booths serving 165,000 visitors, my guess is that they originate here. (My flight from Chicago in mid-October was filled with businesspeople en route to the three-week event.)

We don't visit the fair, but we do spend a day at Onelink, an eight-floor, two-wing shopping extravaganza attached to a 37-story tower for wholesale and retail buyers of stuff. We circumambulate the first floor, where independent contractors in shops large and small sell earrings, necklaces, sparkly hair clips, beaded evening bags, "Gucci" handbags, zippered computer pouches, backpacks, plastic sunglasses, wallets, plastic key chains and many shiny plastic objects. One store sells only smiley-face buttons. Toys, toys, toys.

We ascend the escalator, passing eight-foot inflatable dancing fish and cascading strands of sparkling lights dangling in the central atrium, and continue on level four. Turning a corner, we stumble into housewares: Wine glasses, martini glasses, every-shape-you-can-name glasses, place mats, tablecloths, espresso makers, coffee mugs, teapots, serving trays, napkins and chopsticks all vie for my attention. On other floors, we find furniture, lighting, stationery, clothes, telescopes, bathmats and candles. I'm like a cartoon character whose eyes pop out and spin like mini-pinball machines.

Most vendors agree to bargain, unless it's lunchtime — or nap time — when we're patently ignored. Some vendors ask for a minimum order of 1,000, though most will sell one of anything. Many speak a little English, though most communicating is done via hand-held calculators. "Best price!" means that no further bargaining is possible. Although, this being China, more bargaining is always possible.

In China, all is in flux and laws are fungible, especially when it comes to driving. Lanes exist as mere suggestions for vehicles that sway side to side while moving forward. Autos share the road with trucks and with motorbikes and bicycles carrying pyramids of precipitously balanced merchandise.

"It's all a matter of filling space," says Jenny, as a car squeezes into our lane for no apparent reason.

Filled space is everywhere. Like at Huadiwan, a market district with an entire wing dedicated to selling fish. Not fish to eat; fish for pets. There are more than 15 million people in this city, and I'm convinced that they all own aquariums. One Sunday morning, Brian and I venture out with 2-year-old Lulu in a jogging stroller on what seems like a simple task of buying fish food, yet the mega-size space, with an arched roof reminiscent of 19th-century railway stations, is a labyrinth of narrow aisles branching off streets wide enough for delivery trucks. I trail Brian past tanks of all sizes filled with every imaginable kind of fish — from teeny neon tetras to stingrays and sharks — and shops overflowing with such fishy accoutrements as aquariums, gravel, filters, live plants, decorative plastic castles, coral, lights, turtles, live bait, frozen food, dried food and more.

Eyeing one particularly crowded, narrow aisle, I take the helm of the stroller, in which Lulu, improbably, is sound asleep. As Brian plunges through the throngs to find one particular vendor, he shouts: "I'll meet you in the plant store. Go to the end and turn left!"

Thirty minutes later I'm cursing, walking round and round the perimeter of where I think I'm supposed to be, passing dozens of vendors selling bright green ferns and grasses, detouring down an outdoor dirt pathway filled with garden plants, then back to the main fish aisle where motorcycles honk and clatter past. Lulu is stirring, and it dawns on me that I have no cellphone, no idea where I am, and I don't know my family's street address. The good news, I realize, as people gather to ogle the sleeping blond child wearing a pink and white ruffled dress with matching shoes and hair ribbons, is that I'm not hard to spot. Cellphones and cameras aim our way: Click, click.

"Gu gu," I say. Aunt.

"There you are," says Brian.

In China, nothing is possible, unless it is. One sunny day, when the often-smoggy air is almost clear, Jenny and I drop the kids at school and drive to Dong Shan Hu, a 33-acre public park with fishing, boat rentals, kiddie amusement rides and an outdoor exercise area for adults. But first we have to park the minivan.

"The most important phrase to learn is 'Tin bu dong,' which roughly translates to, 'I hear you are speaking to me, but I have no idea what you're saying,' " explains Jenny. "Then you smile, wave and add, in English, 'Bye-bye!' "

We lock the van and are approached by a man in an official-looking uniform who speaks rapidly while gesturing and pointing. He wants us to park over there, farther down the road. We want to park here. Jenny pays for two hours, and we stroll away. "Tin bu dong! Bye-bye!"

In the park, people are dancing. It's not tai chi or martial arts, though we see some of that. It's dancercise. Self-appointed leaders with rock-star headsets demonstrate regimented steps to multi-generational clusters of men and women. Some waltz in pairs to amplified music while others do a Chinese version of the Cha-Cha Slide. Nearby, 200 or so people gather in a shady amphitheater for a group singalong, following handwritten words displayed on four-foot-tall notepads held in place with banana-size clips.

"Keep off the lovely lawn," reads one sign in the park. "Excellent Toilet," reads another. But my favorite translation in all Guangzhou is up 108 stories in the Canton Tower. This TV and radio transmission slash tourist sightseeing tower — the tallest structure in China — posts a warning to those brave enough to step out on the glass floor section of the observation deck: "Visitors with the following diseases are not recommended to enter: acrophobia, high blood pressure, heart disease, labyrinthitis, headache, nosebleed, slimy doom." Noted.

"What are those fat masters doing?" asks Kiki.

Good question. We're in the 500 Arhat Hall in the Hualin Temple, a convincing reconstruction of a Buddhist temple dating back 1,500 years. The new 500 arhats are larger-than-life-size, gold-painted sculptures of big-bellied Buddha-like "masters" who've reached a state of nirvana. Before entering, we purchase incense and mimic those who wave the sticks, bow and insert them, smoking, in a sand-filled cart on wheels. A friend mentions that each gold master represents one attribute of perfection, so we may offer devotions — depending on our aspirations or wishes — to one holding a

flute, a book, five squirming children or 497 other choices. We attempt to explain this to Kiki, but she skips away.

“Why are there peanuts on the altar?” asks Kiki.

Good question. Outside the peaceful temple grounds, commerce reigns. It’s the jade market, a warren of streets with stalls selling bangles, bracelets, rings, pendants, beads and small sculptures, that’s adjacent to the indoor Hualin Jade Market, a 10,700-plus square-foot emporium selling jade and pearls to wholesale and retail buyers. Everywhere I turn, someone is selling something; there’s even a thriving market, it seems, for stone slabs that mimic bacon. We purchase pomegranates from a street vendor and search for small stone animals for the kids. Palm-size carvings are 50 yuan, or about \$7.80, and look exactly like the ones selling in the Shanghai airport for 450 yuan, or about \$70.

A less bustling, less overwhelming — okay, I’ll say it — more Westernized part of town is Shamian Island, a territory created as a result of the Second Opium War and deeded to the British and French in 1859. Americans arriving for adoptions come here to process the papers. (The U.S. Consulate General operates from four locations scattered throughout Guangzhou. A centralized building, now under construction, is expected to open in 2013.)

On a rare solo excursion, I wander Shamian’s broad pedestrian walkway, lined with elegant Baroque, neo-classical and Palladian architecture. Newly minted American families push babies in strollers alongside soon-to-be-hitched Chinese couples who pose for formal wedding portraits in rented clothing, while other visitors snap pictures next to life-size bronze sculptures of hillbillies playing fiddles, leapfrogging children and male photojournalists with extra-long camera lenses. We all mingle in Starbucks, where there’s a decidedly non-Western black sesame green tea roll, though a Frappuccino is still a Frappuccino, and costs about \$4.50.

My last day. As an antidote to the city’s bustle, we pack our bathing suits, two kids (Shea and Kiki), two friends of kids and their mom into the van and set the GPS device for Bishuiwan Hot Spring, an hour and a half north of town. Jenny promises a spa with dozens of hot springs pools, some filled with roses, lemons, hibiscus tea or wine. Women in pointed straw hats will serve ginger tea and place pale chilled green cucumber slices on my face. Tiny fish will nibble dead skin from my toes. Hot waterfalls will pummel my aching back.

But — and in China there’s often a but — it seems that the spa’s driveway is closed because of work crews on the highway. We attempt to persuade them to let us through. We point and smile. The children whine. The workers spread hot asphalt and wave us away.

Backtracking, we find an adjacent spa and ask to park so that we can walk from one property to another. Phone calls are made. Managers are summoned. We tour the second spa, decide it’s inferior and decide to leave.

Then a woman speaks — we have no idea what she’s saying — and points to an open gate that leads to the property we seek. Could she have shown us this an hour ago? Certainly. Does it matter? Not really. In a flash, we scurry away.

“Tin bu dong! Bye-bye!”

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