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*Beijing is a place you have
to see (taste, smell and hear)
to believe. By Dan Levin*



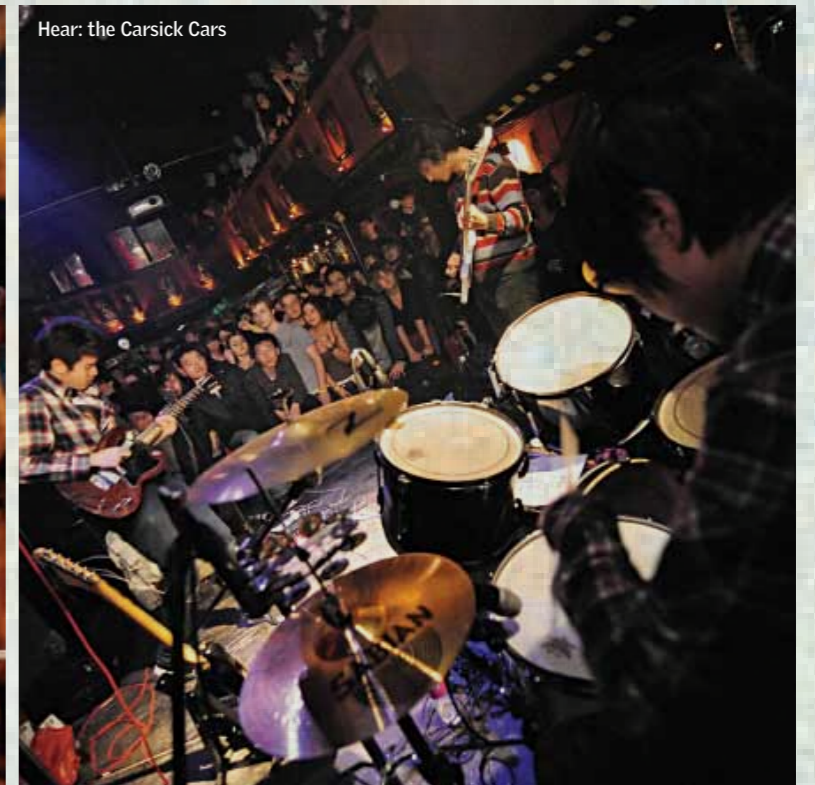
See: the Forbidden City



Taste: skewered scorpions and sea horses



Smell: burning incense at the Lama Temple



Hear: the Carsick Cars



The Great Wall of China, Mutianyu section

*I'm standing
on the edge of
the Great Wall,
staring down
at Mandarin
Duck Lake
and wondering
if I'm crazy.*

The small woman holding the zip line harness notices my apprehension and offers the same grin she's probably flashed countless times to thousands of other tourists. I've just completed a four-hour trek along the three-mile section of the Great Wall of China known as Simatai, which was originally constructed in the sixth century and snakes precariously over the mountains, its crumbling watchtowers perched like sentinels all the way to the horizon. As petrified as I am, I'm also tired, hot and thirsty, and I'm thinking the zip line across the glittering lake is the quickest way to some pork dumplings and a cab ride back to Beijing. So I throw caution to the wind and wriggle into the straps, gazing at my distant destination across the sheet of water with my heart pounding. But where is my helmet? How do I slow down? The woman shakes her head and points to a man on the other side, ready to catch me. I ask for any final instructions, and she responds in her limited English. "Sit," she says, patting my rear. "Go!"

Suddenly I'm flying through the air watching the massive ancient wall fall away behind me. I scream with joy over the rushing wind, thankful the simple pulley system is functioning correctly. Far off, tourists wearing bright hats trudge along the wall, and I, suspended in the sky above them, feel on top of the world. But

I'm swooping close to the other side, where the man holds his arms outstretched in front of a thickly padded post. WHAM! We collide into the cushions as I let out one last whoop, my feet firmly back on land and adrenaline pounding through my body. As I catch my breath, the man smiles widely and greets me in heavily accented English: "Welcome to China!"

Living in Beijing gives me the same rush. The capital that Genghis Khan's grandson founded 800 years ago is a sensory overload, bursting with life and a zest for the future grounded in centuries of tradition. I came here to explore this rising stronghold of global economic and political power and found a world where the narrow streets and alleys (called *hutongs*) have names like Soldiers and Horses Hutong and Dragon Whiskers Ditch Hutong, tattooed rockers in Chuck Taylors rage on drums, and tea vintages are collected like the finest wines.

Two years past the Olympics, the city continues to bound with energy, sustained by a perky economic outlook and a vibrant arts scene. And like zip-lining off the Great Wall, Beijing beckons you to jump into the unknown with eyes, ears, nose, mouth and arms wide open. So live a little, eat a lot and discover this metropolis's feast for all your senses.

See It:

I'm not expecting much as I take my seat for the acrobat show at Chaoyang Theater. The Chinese love cheesy music, and I'm beginning to have flashbacks to cruise-ship cabaret shows of the early 1990s. But then the somersaults begin — through three towering hoops — and I realize Cirque Du Soleil is about to get a run for its money.

Acrobat troupes have a long history in Beijing, and today these shows feature the nation's most agile and flexible performers. For the next hour, my jaw hangs open as the show — part Carnival, part circus — unfolds with physics- and death-defying precision. One heavily spandexed performer flips vertically 10 feet and lands on a pole balanced on the shoulder of a fellow acrobat. The crowd erupts into applause. A dozen young girls appear on a tiny platform, contorting their bodies like invertebrates. Two muscled teenage boys descend from the ceiling in what look like two man-size hamster wheels, which swoop around on a central axis while the boys — blindfolded — leap and flip in the air. But nothing prepares me for the final act, in which 12 girls balance on one moving bicycle while they're waving to fans. It is something you have to see to believe.

For centuries, Beijing showcased China's most glorious visual masterpieces, and the capital continues to attract the country's premier creative forces today. Halfway between the city center and the airport, the hulking industrial buildings of the city's 798 Art District still ooze with the gritty manufacturing soul of its former life as an electronics factory. But now the assembly lines have been replaced by art. Here, concrete and rusty steel frame the galleries and performance spaces fueling the city's hunger for inspiration and the world's seemingly insatiable appetite for modern Chinese art.

The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, a huge nonprofit space guarded by plastic dinosaurs sculpted by Sui Jianguo, highlights some of China's brightest emerging talent in film, painting and sculpture, while Pace Beijing, an outpost of New York's The Pace Gallery, blends exhibitions by China's leading artists such as Ai Weiwei and Yue Minjun with those of international luminaries like Chuck Close and Takashi Murakami. But the magic of 798 is in getting lost in the side streets and stumbling upon unique creative expressions that you'd never expect to see hanging on a gallery wall. Unlike New York's Chelsea or London's Soho, 798 boasts a lively artist crowd busy at work in studios interspersed among the galleries, and these people are more than happy to talk. So come prepared to mingle. Who knows? You may just befriend China's next artistic superstar.



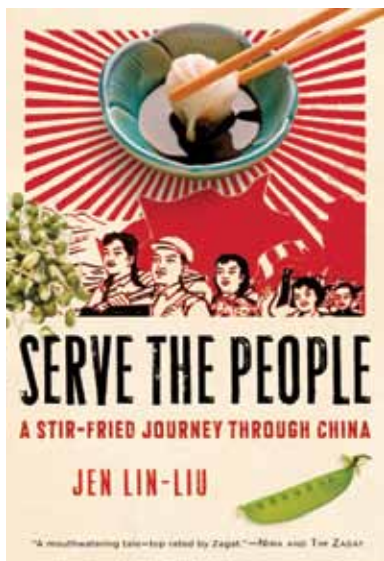
Clockwise from bottom left: the Chaoyang Theater acrobat show performing on bicycles, an acrobat, the 798 Art District, and a gallery at the 798 Art District



Taste It:

When locals greet one another, they skip the standard formality of "How are you?" and go right for the gut: "Have you eaten yet?" Such gastronomic curiosity reveals much about how Beijing relates to food. It's nearly an obsession, and exploring local cuisine — from sweet red-bean cakes to succulent Peking duck — requires a hearty appetite

Counterclockwise from top left: the Black Sesame Kitchen, BSK founder Jen Lin-Liu's book, and a woman holding burning incense at the Lama Temple



(and sometimes a strong stomach). The Chinese believe that foods hold cooling or heating properties that fuel the body's qi, or energy. As such, they take everything they eat very seriously, and so should you.

The capital has attracted wanderers from across China for centuries, and its kitchens and restaurants are a delectable map of flavors. Cumin-flecked mutton skewers of the far western region of Xinjiang smoke on sidewalk grills, while nearby, Yunnan's famous pineapple rice is served steaming in the tangy fruit. Down the block, a raucous restaurant offers a myriad of Sichuan dishes, all flaming in chilies.

When I want a guide on my foodie adventures, I head to Black Sesame Kitchen. There are no signs advertising this "by appointment only" gem tucked among the rickety shacks of its neighbors, but that only adds to the authenticity of the experience. BSK was

founded by Jen Lin-Liu, the Chinese-American author of *Serve the People: A Stir-Fried Journey Through China* who landed in Beijing 10 years ago and eventually enrolled in a local cooking school to discover her heritage with wok in hand. Those experiences fill her mouthwatering book and sparked the inspiration to open this private kitchen, where chef Zhang Aifeng cooks up 10-course meals right at the communal table, so you can see how real Chinese food is created. I couldn't stop eating the pork-and-pumpkin dumplings and the fish-fragrant fried eggplant, but the red-braised pork is what's seared into my memory. Legendary as the favorite dish of former People's Republic of China leader Chairman Mao (he reportedly ate it twice a day), the diced pork belly is simmered with sugar, star anise and wine for about an hour, and it's worth a trip to China all by itself.

The Chinese also have a liking for more-exotic dishes, many of which are on display nightly at the Dong Hua Men Night Market. This chaos of food stalls and the accompanying horde of hungry gawkers is a perfect example of the boisterous, crowded ideal the Chinese call *renao*, or "hot and noisy." Here you can find ready-to-eat skewered sea horse, sea star, grasshopper, scorpion and snake (the last of which the Chinese believe to be a powerful aphrodisiac). It might be easy to turn your nose up at these delicacies, but China demands an open mind. So, close your eyes and take a bite. If you still have an appetite after that, bowls of steaming noodles and tiny candied-apple skewers await, though they're not nearly as worthy of a photo op.



The faithful gather at the gates of the Lama Temple at dawn, carrying massive Tibetan incense sticks made of sandalwood to burn before the 55-foot-tall statue of the Maitreya Buddha within. Here at one of Beijing's rare working lamaseries, tourists rub shoulders with pilgrims deep in prayer for prosperity and plum-robed monks hurrying to worship.

Once the palace of Prince Yong Zheng, the compound was converted into a temple in 1744 following the prince's rise to the imperial throne, and amid the city's office towers and traffic it retains a majestic energy inside its high vermilion walls. The air is thick with fragrant smoke, which the Chinese believe carries their wishes to the gods as it rises from huge bronze burners.

I sometimes come here in the mornings to watch my neighbors connect with tradition before they head to work or school. In late spring, hundreds of high school students from across the country come to pray for college acceptance; septuagenarians often meditate in the shade. A visit here is a must, as is a jaunt down the nearby road where shops sell incense, worry beads and fake money to burn as an offering.

While no trip to Beijing would be complete without a visit to the Forbidden City, a former imperial palace,



Counterclockwise from top left: the yellow roofs of the Forbidden City, the Lama Temple, members of the Carsick Cars, the nightclub Punk inside Opposite House hotel



many travelers miss the stunning vista of the emperor's private domain from the top of Coal Hill, which was shaped from the dirt excavated to form the palace moat across the boulevard. On a clear day, while standing in the Ten Thousand Springs pagoda perched on the hill's peak, you can see the palace's hundreds of pitched yellow roofs stretching southward all the way to Tiananmen Square.

Inhaling the sweet scent of blooming roses in Jingshan Park below, you feel like you're at the center of the world. And in a sense you are, since the Forbidden City lies at the heart of Beijing and thus is China's central ceremonial axis. Feng shui masters believed that Coal Hill protected the imperial court from negative energy, and indeed the surrounding park exudes a deep aura of tranquility. But be prepared for an orchestra of leisure. Amid the tai chi masters and the women dancing with flowing ribbons are dozens of people who gather here on weekends to belt out traditional songs (some of them a bit off-key), assisted by a microphone and accompanied by accordion players. Fortunately, there are dozens of places to relax quietly, guidebook in hand.

The band, a scraggly trio of 20-somethings called Carsick Cars, takes the smoky stage at Mao Livehouse near midnight to whoops and hollers from the hundreds of sweaty music hounds in the pit below. As one of Beijing's leading indie bands (who have opened for American experimental rock legends Sonic Youth and who played at this year's South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas), these rockers are leading the city's charge for new music that leaves the pop tunes that incessantly drip from the radio in the dust.

A distinctly local venue with graffiti-fitted walls, cheap booze and one of the best sound systems in town, Mao Livehouse could easily fit in on New York's Lower East Side and has built a similar musical heritage out of the die-hard fans who flock to groove to the rappers, funk musicians and punk rockers who regularly wail on stage. Beijing is lauded as China's sound capital, and Mao Live beats loudly at its heart.

It's hard to imagine that 15 years ago, Beijing's nightlife options were restricted to karaoke emporiums and rice-wine hangovers. Now the nocturnal map is flush with lounges, bars and dance clubs drawing musical talent

from across the globe playing till dawn.

If you're in the mood to move rather than just to listen, the nightclub Punk should be first on your list. Hidden in the bowels of a boutique hotel called Opposite House, Punk hosts top DJs, megaparties and a luxe cross section of local fashionistas, expats and artists writhing on the dance floor. If music is a global language, Punk is fluent, pumping up the volume with high-tempo beats that best anything LA or Berlin can spin, and that's just the way China would want it.

In Beijing, visitors are referred to as *laowai*, a kindly honorific meaning "old foreigner." Unlike in the West, where people might dismiss you for not knowing the language or being clueless about the culture, locals in Beijing feel honored to teach you about their world and welcome you into their lives (and of course, make you try their favorite foods). The key to learning the personality of this metropolis and its denizens is to lose yourself within it. Because in Beijing, there is always another alley to find, another temple to explore and another dish to try. **EW**

DAN LEVIN is a freelance writer based in Beijing who writes for the *New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune* and *Forbes*.