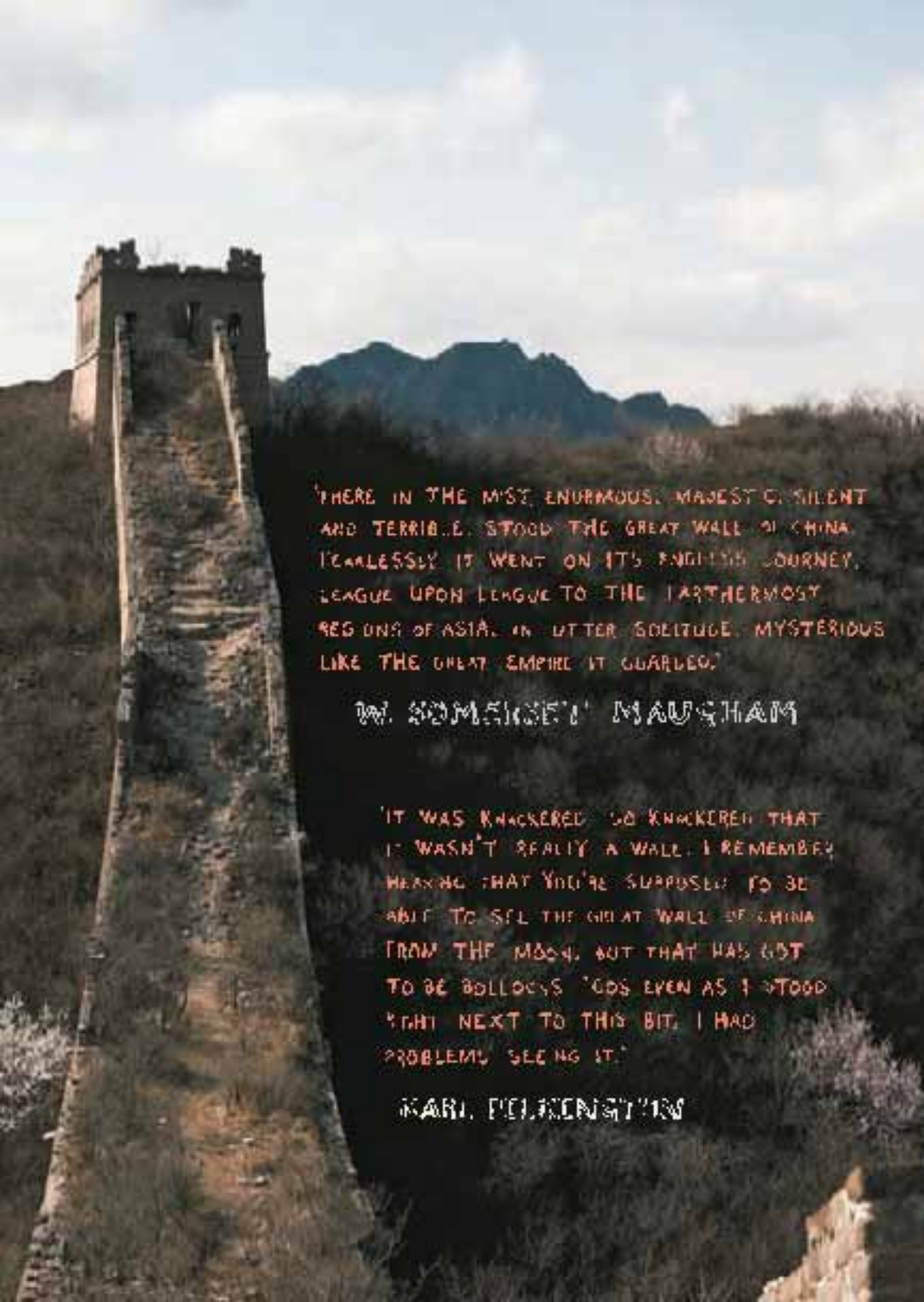


CHAPTER FIVE
THE GREAT WALL





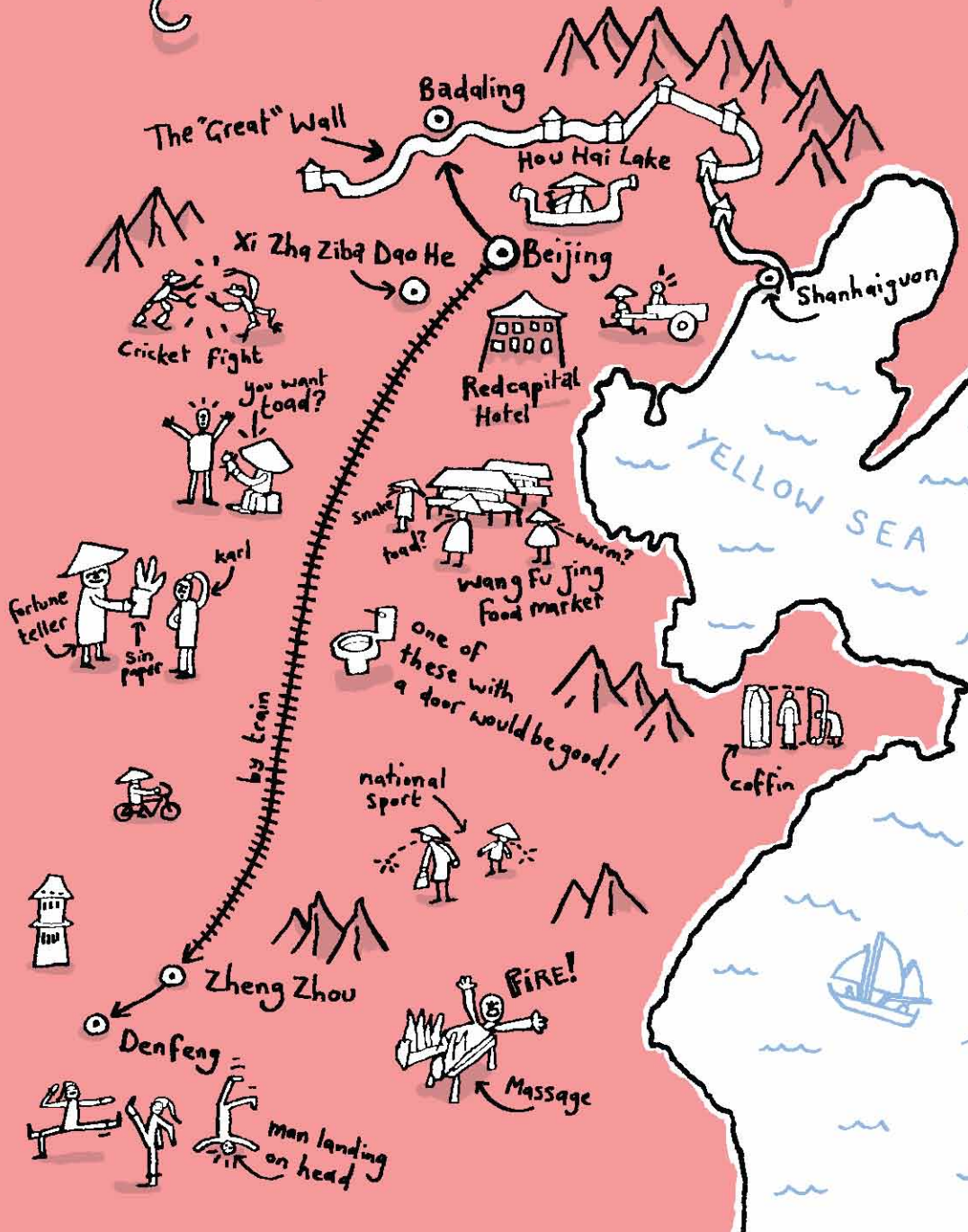
THERE IN THE MIST, ENORMOUS, MAJESTIC, SILENT
AND TERRIBLE, STOOD THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA.
FEARLESSLY IT WENT ON ITS ENDLESS JOURNEY,
LEAGUE UPON LEAGUE TO THE FARTHERMOST
REGIONS OF ASIA, IN UTTER SOLITUDE, MYSTERIOUS
LIKE THE GREAT EMPIRE IT GUARDED.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

'IT WAS KNACKERED, SO KNACKERED THAT
IT WASN'T REALLY A WALL. I REMEMBER
HEARING THAT YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE
ABLE TO SEE THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA
FROM THE MOON, BUT THAT HAS GOT
TO BE BOLLOCKS. GODS EVEN AS I STOOD
RIGHT NEXT TO THIS BIT, I HAD
PROBLEMS SEEING IT.'

MARI FELDENSTAM

C H I N A



SATURDAY 17TH APRIL

The odd thing with China is, they like to go out of their way to do things differently. Even something simple like reading a book they mess with. They read books from top to bottom and then back to the top again. It looks like they're agreeing with everything they're reading. Their food looks different too. I used to walk through Chinatown on the way to work and the food I'd often see hanging in the restaurant windows was bright red chickens. I don't know if they did something odd to the chickens, or if they had just been sat in the window for so long that they had got a tan.

I like to have Chinese food maybe once a month but the idea of having it every day for a week doesn't excite me that much. China is also the country that seems to eat anything that moves. When I was growing up, there were always rumours of the Chinese eating dogs. When Small Terrance took over the local chippy and sold Chinese as well as fish and chips, people on the estate started to blame him for their missing pets.

Ricky and Steve think I should eat anything the locals eat, but I don't see the point of this in the long run. If the locals eat toads, and I try it and find that I really like it, I won't be able to find any butchers that sell toad back in London, so what's the point of getting a taste for it in the first place?

I also associate crazy inventions and technology with China. I have a book that is full of odd Chinese inventions. I remember seeing a hat with a toilet-roll holder on the top, and a picture of small mops on cats' feet so when they wander around the kitchen waiting to be fed they can clean the floor at the same time.

The Great Wall of China is the reason I'm visiting the country. I can't say I'm looking forward to seeing it. I always have a problem liking things that I'm told I should like. This has been the problem with most of the Wonders I have seen so far. The fact that this one is called the 'Great' Wall of China annoys me. I'll decide if it's great or not. It might end up being the 'All Right Wall of China' to me.

I'm expecting the Chinese to be really polite. I don't know why. I don't know if I read it somewhere, or I was told, or I've just come to that conclusion based on the fact that all the Chinese people I have met in my life so far have been polite. Which makes me wonder even more about

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the Wall being 'Great'. Even if it was rubbish, I have a feeling the Chinese would be too polite to say so. I suppose I'll find out, soon enough.



SATURDAY 24TH / SUNDAY 25TH APRIL

It was a really long flight. Out of the plane window I saw the sun, then the moon, and then the sun again. But I am glad to have seen the sun so much, because it doesn't look like I will be seeing much of it while I'm here, due to all the pollution. When we landed the sky was a murky, foggy grey. It was really cold as well. I had to get me coat out. I thought China was full of sweatshops but I don't know how in these temperatures.

We left the airport and got dropped off in town. Krish the producer said I should try and find my hotel by asking local people for directions. Great. I asked about 15 people, and not one of them spoke English. I showed the name of the place where I was staying on a piece of paper to an old man, and he grabbed my arm and walked with me. I thought he knew where the hotel was, but he just took me to a small seat, sat me down and then pummelled my back. He was a massager. He must have been about 80 years old but he was still pretty heavy-handed. I've never been touched by such an old man. But then again, was he really old? I've always thought that the Chinese don't age very well, that they look healthy and good-looking until about the age of 35, and then they just look old. I told Ricky once I thought that they maybe aged overnight like a pear, but he didn't understand what I was going on about.

This bloke who was massaging my back might only have been about 38. You decide.

Normally, a massage would be given with the sound of panpipes or a CD of whale noises, but in Beijing all I could hear was throats being cleared and spitting. It mustn't be rude to spit here, as everyone seems to do it. Finally, I found a young girl who translated what was on my piece of paper to a rickshaw driver.

The hotel I'm staying in seems nice enough, although my room is



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pretty small. I have a kettle and teabags, and next to that I have two goldfish in a bowl. I'm not sure if they're for company or for a snack. There is also a budgie hanging outside the window. I think I'll be happy here. I ate a packet of my Monster Munch that I had brought with me, and then we wandered off to an old local market. The smell was similar to Chinatown in Manchester and London – that sort of sweet and sour smell. The first thing I saw was a man on a street corner crouching next to a few washing-up bowls full of large catfish and eels. As I was looking at the fish, he pulled out three carrier bags. One was full of toads. At first I thought they were dead, as there wasn't much movement, but then one of the 80 or so toads tried to escape. The man grabbed it when it jumped and cut its head off. He then continued his way through the rest of them. It was a complete toad massacre, all because one had tried to get away. One by one, he took the head off, stripped the skin off the body, put the meat into one bag and the skin in the other. The toads went from hopping in carrier bag number one to being dead and stripped in bags two and three in a matter of seconds. I didn't find it easy to watch, but he was impressively fast and seemed to know what he was doing. The scissors cut through the toad's neck in one easy cut. They were just a basic pair of scissors similar to the ones I've got at home, the sort you use to cut string and wrapping paper, Sellotape . . . and toads' heads. He was an expert at toad stripping. He seemed pleased to show us his skill. He could probably do it blindfolded, like those soldiers you see putting together a machine gun.

As we watched, a few policemen turned up, and Krish thought we had better move on, as we were not supposed to be filming around there. They like to protect how China is perceived, and there was a chance that they could take the tape from the camera off us. We went to a newer part of the market. The stalls and layout looked more similar to the markets I see at home, until I got a closer look. They were selling insects. Rows and rows of bugs on sticks. They had big black scorpions, snakes, worms and locusts all laid out like they were queuing to get on Noah's Ark. People had told me about street food in China, but I didn't think it meant making food out of stuff that normally crawls the street. Most of the bugs had been dipped in some sort of oil to make them look more tempting to the eye while the lizard looked like someone



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had just found it crushed under a breezeblock and stuck a stick up its arse. Seeing all this makes me wonder if the old woman in the nursery rhyme who swallowed a cat to catch the bird to catch the spider was Chinese. That sounds like a normal diet round here.

Our van driver stopped off to eat some duck feet us eggs. They looked rank. I said before I came here that the Chinese eat anything that moves; I've now found out that they'll eat stuff before it's even had a chance to move. Why they can't just wait for it to be born and eat it as a duck I don't know. They might as well eat duck sperm to save even more time. I've heard that they also eat 100-year-old eggs but I don't know how anything gets to be that old here without someone eating it. We went back to the hotel. I ate one of my five Twix bars and another packet of Monster Munch. I should've brought more.

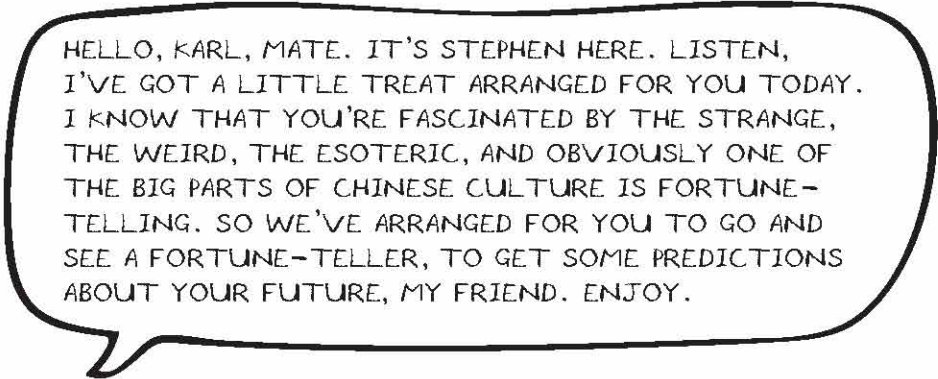


MONDAY 26TH APRIL

I didn't sleep very well because the buzzer for the front door of the hotel is next to my room. It sounds like a car alarm. Roadworks also started really early, which seemed to irritate the budgie, so then it tweeted for half an hour. I don't know how it isn't dead. It's freezing out there. I checked my phone. My mam had emailed to ask if I was okay and wanted to know if I would be seeing the Terracotta Army, as she had seen it on the telly and it looked good. Talking about the Terracotta Army reminded her that me dad had painted her gnomes, so she'd attached a photo to her email. Suzanne had also texted to say good-night. The time difference is going to make it tough to have a chat with anyone at home. Seven hours' time difference.



Just as I nodded off, Krish woke me up to tell me that Steve had left a message on my phone. I hadn't been listening to voicemail, as it's too expensive, but Krish said I needed to hear it to find out what plans I had for today.



HELLO, KARL, MATE. IT'S STEPHEN HERE. LISTEN, I'VE GOT A LITTLE TREAT ARRANGED FOR YOU TODAY. I KNOW THAT YOU'RE FASCINATED BY THE STRANGE, THE WEIRD, THE ESOTERIC, AND OBVIOUSLY ONE OF THE BIG PARTS OF CHINESE CULTURE IS FORTUNE-TELLING. SO WE'VE ARRANGED FOR YOU TO GO AND SEE A FORTUNE-TELLER, TO GET SOME PREDICTIONS ABOUT YOUR FUTURE, MY FRIEND. ENJOY.

I wasn't happy about this. I don't want to know what the rest of my life is going to be like. Even if what he says is nonsense I think it will play on my mind and stop me getting on with my life. The best thing about life is the surprises, and we're getting fewer and fewer surprises these days. Even the simple thing of waking up in the morning and opening the curtains to see what the weather is like is a nice surprise, but now *Countryfile* with John Craven has taken that away with its five-day forecast. In truth, the only thing that would have been handy about knowing my future is that we wouldn't have booked into this hotel, as we'd have known about the bloody roadworks outside. In the morning I got up and had a hard-boiled egg and some odd bread, and then headed over to the fortune-teller.

The place didn't look very mystical. It was on a dual carriageway with a 'wash while you wait' car wash on one side and a block of flats on the other. It turned out that the fortune-teller didn't speak a word of English, so we had to use a translator. After asking the date and time of my birth he got straight on with the fortune-telling.

The translator said, 'The south side of your house is quite low. Is that right?'



The Great Wall

'Err, low, yeah, I'm on the ground floor. It's low. Yeah, I'll give him that.'
Mr Sow, the fortune-teller talked in Chinese.

The translator said, 'You will have to pay attention to your health because you have some kind of heart problem.'

'Oh, here we go . . . What sort of heart problem?'

The translator said, 'Something to do with your heart, blood vessels, so you really need to take care of that.'

'It's weird, because my dad had a problem with his heart, and they say it runs in the family.'

The translator said, 'You be very careful if you do have a problem. It's probably something to do with your heart.'

'Is it going to kill me then? Is this what he's telling you? That the problem with the heart is going to finish me off?'

'Ninety per cent.'

'Ninety per cent!'

'But maybe we can change it.'

'All right, that sounds better.'

The translator said, 'Do a lot of good things. Try to raise the goodness in your life.'

'Wha-? I've got to look at the good things in my life? Do a lot of good things, like helping people? I do loads of that. I do loads of good. Tell him I do Tools for Africa - four quid a month, Help the Aged - I think they get a five, deaf kids, and the latest one was Red Cross, so that's four charities each costing on average five quid a month so that's 20 quid a month I'm giving to charity.'

The translator talked in Chinese to Mr Sow, then said, 'Well done. Otherwise you would be even worse. You would be more ill than you are now.'

After he told me this news he asked me to write down three sins. After quite a bit of thinking, I went with the following:

SIN 1 I AM SORRY ABOUT NICKING MARKS BARS FROM THE NEWSAGENT'S THAT I DELIVERED PAPERS FOR. I HELPED MYSELF TO ONE EVERY DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, FOR OVER TWO YEARS (MAYBE THIS IS WHY I'M GONNA HAVE A HEART ATTACK).



The Great Wall

- SIN 2 I AM SORRY FOR OPENING THE POST THAT WAS ADDRESSED TO BRUCE (THE MAN WHO USED TO OWN OUR FLAT) INSTEAD OF FORWARDING IT ON.
- SIN 3 I AM SORRY FOR PUTTING PUTTY IN CARL GRIMSHAW'S HAIR, WHEN I WAS A KID. IT ALL GOT TANGLED UP, AND HE HAD TO HAVE HIS HEAD SHAVED. HIS MAM WENT MAD AT ME BECAUSE HE HAS A FUNNY-SHAPED HEAD AND THIS MADE IT STAND OUT EVEN MORE.

Mr Sow then told me he would burn one of the sins and I must take the other two and dispose of one on a mountain and the other in the sea. He and his workers then did a small ceremony for me, which involved standing with a joss stick in the freezing cold while people danced around me setting fire to paper. All this standing about in the cold can't be good for a man with a heart problem. Later, we went to a local place for something to eat. I played it safe and had some noodles but ate another Twix when I got back to my room.



TUESDAY 27TH APRIL

I woke up at 4.30 a.m. I still have jet lag. I looked out of the window to see that even the budgie was asleep . . . or dead.

To kill some time I picked up a book in my room with quotes from a man called Mao Tse-Tung. He was a Chinese statesman. He once said: 'We think too small, like the frog at the bottom of the well. He thinks the sky is only as big as the top of the well. If he surfaced, he would have an entirely different view.'

It made me think about how I was a bit like that frog before I started to travel the world for this programme. Having said that, I'm not sure it's even worth the frog coming out of its well to see more of the sky anyway, as it's pretty grim here with all the pollution, plus the fact that it ain't safe for a frog in China 'cos someone would come along and



THE FORTUNE TELLER, OR MISFORTUNE
TELLER IN MY CASE.



MY SINS ARE ABOUT TO GO UP IN SMOKE.



HOW ABOUT BUILDING A FEW GREAT
WALLS IN THE TOILETS?



I BOUGHT THESE THEN WISHED I HADN'T.
WITH ALL THE POLLUTION IN BEIJING
YOU CAN'T ACTUALLY SEE THE SUN.

The Great Wall

grab it, cut its head off and eat it. So, all in all, it wasn't good advice from Mao Tse-Tung. I had a hard-boiled egg for breakfast again. The crew were filming on the street today, getting pictures of traffic and local people. As they worked, I realised I needed the loo. I popped into one that was close by and was greeted by two blokes squatting on their haunches. The cubicles didn't have doors on them.

One of the men gave me a wink. At first I thought he may have just been straining then I noticed it was one of the chefs from where we ate last night. The other fella was busy nattering on his mobile, probably taking an order for a takeaway. I nipped out and told Krish about my dilemma. I have always struggled with these hole-in-the-ground toilets. It's not so much the hole in the ground, more the fact that there is no door. It's odd to think they built the Great Wall of China but can't be bothered to get a bit of MDF, stick some hinges on it and make a door. There were no sinks or toilet paper either. I wonder if I can find one of them toilet-roll hats I saw in my invention book. I went to an indoor market while they carried on filming. The place was filled with replica goods being sold at low prices: clothing, DVDs, mobile phones, watches and shoes. I bought a mobile-phone holder, a coat and a DVD to watch, as there are no English-speaking channels on the telly. I was going to get something to eat but even this place, which is specifically aimed at tourists, still offered up odd food. Blood cake was everywhere. Big blocks of the stuff. A block of blood should not have the word 'cake' after it. It doesn't kid me into wanting some. They may as well say 'Shite Gâteau'. I drove back in the bus with everyone else. The driver broke wind twice. He didn't seem embarrassed about it. When I got back the others told me the coat looked nice enough but probably isn't very waterproof.

I had some more noodles at the place on the corner and was told by Krish that I would be seeing the Wall tomorrow.

I watched the DVD I bought before I went to bed. It was a pirate copy so the quality was really poor, but the film wasn't very good anyway – it had been recorded with a camcorder in a cinema. I saw a bloke get up and leave the cinema about 35 minutes in, so even he thought it wasn't very good.

They're probably right about that coat not being waterproof.



WEDNESDAY 28TH APRIL

I was up early again so I managed to talk to Suzanne before she went to bed. I told her that I was off to see the Wall. I told her that I can't be doing with the Wonder part of these trips, but she said it should be the icing on the cake. But the thing with me is, I don't really enjoy the icing on a cake. I often pull off the icing and leave it. The icing is just there to get your attention, but I wouldn't say it's the best bit. And that's how I feel about the Wonders – they're the reason I'm going everywhere, but they're never my favourite bit. I've never liked wedding cake due to the amount of icing, but then imagine a wedding cake without it; just a dark, stodgy, horrible dry sponge. The icing covers up the mess, and that's how I feel about most of the Wonders. They use them to get people to visit a place that you probably wouldn't think about visiting. Maybe blood cake would look better with icing though.

We had the usual hard-boiled egg for breakfast and made our way over to the tour buses. Ricky and Steve had arranged for me to get a lift on a tour bus so I could learn a few things about the Wall before seeing it.

There must have been about 50 coaches parked up ready to head over to the Great Wall. After asking around I found the right bus. It was a full bus. About 50 people. About 50 Chinese people. The tour guide got on. He was also Chinese. He turned on the microphone and started his tour in Chinese. Brilliant.

I didn't have a clue what was being said so I just tried to enjoy the trip.

The passengers all looked really old, but maybe I'm just right about them not ageing well. The average age seemed to be about 70. I don't understand why so many old Chinese people have not seen the Wall at some point in their life already, which makes me think it can't be very good. If they're late in their life and haven't bothered to make the journey to see it before now, what does that tell you?

In a way it's just as well I can't understand the Chinese tour guide as I wouldn't have been able to hear him anyway due to the amount of coughing and clearing of throats on the bus. Coughing and clearing of throats must have the same effect as yawning as everyone was doing it. I was sat next to an old woman who looked like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth . . . mainly due to the fact that she'd cough it up with the



THE GREAT WALL BY GOLF BUGGY.



ME ON A BUS.



COME TO THE GREAT WALL! IT'S GREAT!



VASE DRIVER WHO EATS ANYTHING. HE'S NOT SMOKING THAT FAG. HE'S EATING IT. HIS HAT ISN'T A NOVELTY HAT, IT'S WHAT'S LEFT OVER FROM BREAKFAST.

An Idiot Abroad

rest of her phlegm before it had a chance to melt. Every minute she'd clear her throat and then spit into a carrier bag she had with her. I couldn't wait to get to the Wall. With all this spit flying around I suppose I'll find out if this coat I have bought is waterproof or not. Eventually we pulled up in a huge car park next to some market stalls selling novelty Chinese hats, woolly hats, scarves, fridge magnets and plates. I bought a woolly hat as it was freezing and then joined the massive queue to get in.

Once I was through the entrance I could see the Wall for miles, like a long snake making its way across the mountains. It was pretty impressive. I wanted to stop for a few minutes to take it all in, but the guide shouted at me to move along. I told Krish that we may as well go it alone now, as we were not going to gain anything by staying with a guide who only spoke Chinese. He agreed.

The Great Wall

We managed to find a bit of the Wall that wasn't too busy. I looked at it. It looked quite new. I was trying to understand what all the fuss was about, but it wasn't easy when I knew nothing about the Wall. Krish gave me a guide to China that had a chapter on the Great Wall. It said it was heavily restored in both the 1950s and 1980s. Surely it can't count as a Wonder if it's not original? If when I went to see the Taj Mahal in India I got there to find a new house built there with a double garage and a gravel driveway, they couldn't still sell it as the Taj Mahal, so why is the Wall getting away with it? Bloody hell, is everything fake in China? The coat I bought, the DVD and now the Wall.

I said I'd had enough and wanted to leave. I had another message on my phone.



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HELLO MATE, STEVE MERCHANT HERE. HOW YOU DOIN'? I HEARD THAT YOU WENT TO SEE THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA TODAY, OR 'THE WALL' AS IT'S KNOWN IN CHINA. I'M SURE YOU ENJOYED IT. OBVIOUSLY, IT'S AMAZING. I KNOW YOU LIKE A BIT OF B.I.Y. SO I IMAGINE YOU LOVE TO SEE HOW A NICE WALL HAS BEEN MADE, AND RICKY AND I WANT YOU TO SEE MORE OF IT. IN FACT, WE WERE HAVING A CHAT AND WE'D LIKE YOU TO SEE ALL OF THE GREAT WALL. LITERALLY ALL OF IT. WE WANT YOU TO TRAVEL THE ENTIRE LENGTH OF THE WALL. SO, ENJOY IT! SEE YA!

I didn't want to see any more of the Wall, but Krish said it would be worthwhile as I'd get to see other parts of China along the way.

We're staying at a different place tonight. It's a house in the middle of nowhere. It looked quite new at first but on closer inspection it was falling apart. The front door wouldn't close, and it is really cold, and my room smells damp. There's a few teabags but no milk.



THURSDAY 29TH APRIL

I saw an old, original part of the Wall today high up in the mountains. It was knackered. So knackered that it wasn't really a wall. I remember hearing that you're supposed to be able to see the Great Wall of China from the moon, but that has got to be bollocks 'cos even as I stood right next to this bit, I had problems seeing it.

I don't know what would make me happy. I didn't like the brand new Wall, and this old bit isn't impressing me either. I'm harder to please than Goldilocks. Still, the journey wasn't a complete waste of time, as I got rid of one of my sins on the mountaintop.

We drove on to a small village where we decided to get out and take a wander. I passed a house with a man doing some D.I.Y. I couldn't work out what he was making, but I guessed that it wouldn't be a toilet door. I asked Krish if I had time to nip in and get a closer look. It turned out the man was making a coffin. Huge thing, it was. I asked who it was for. He said it was for the woman who lives in the house. At that point the woman came to the door. She told me that it is normal practice to have a coffin made for you at your house. She was 69. After what the fortune-teller told me maybe I should get this fella's number.

I'm not sure I like the idea of having the coffin made in my own front garden. Every day when you leave the house, there it is. It's probably the only time I wouldn't want a handyman to complete the job in the estimated time. Plus, the flat I live in has not got the space to have something like that just sat there, and if I popped it outside I would have to get a parking permit for it.

As the man worked away on the coffin, the woman looked on, inspecting it as if she was having her porch painted. She said, 'Once this is done, I'll feel much happier. Because I'll know it has been done. And I will know what sort of coffin I'll be in when I die. I will be much happier.'

She told me that her husband died 20 years ago at the age of 50 and his coffin wasn't ready. They don't normally plan to have the coffin made until they are around 70, so he ended up being buried in the one that was prepared for her mam.

We left them to it and carried on walking. I saw another coffin outside another house. This one was finished and painted black, and it was pushed up against the wall ready for whoever needs it. If we did this, my mam would have filled hers with clutter in no time. Wherever there's a space, she fills it with something. Saying that, it wouldn't be so bad if they got rid of the lid and used it as a big windowbox or something, and popped some flowers in until it was needed.

While I'd been checking out the coffins Krish had arranged for me to have some lunch at a local's house. In return I chopped some wood for their fire. There was a woman and her husband with a small kid. The gran also lived with them. The kid wore some pants with the arse cut out. These are popular here, as kids are potty-trained before they

KARL'S FACTS

URING ITS CONSTRUCTION, THE GREAT WALL WAS CALLED "THE LONGEST CEMETERY ON EARTH" BECAUSE MORE THAN ONE MILLION PEOPLE DIED BUILDING IT.



ACCORDING TO LEGEND, A HELPFUL DRAGON TRACKED OUT THE COURSE OF THE GREAT WALL FOR THE WORKFORCE. THE BUILDERS SUBSEQUENTLY FOLLOWED THE TRACKS OF THE DRAGON.

THE CHINESE INVENTED THE WHEELBARROW AND USED IT EXTENSIVELY IN BUILDING THE GREAT WALL.



THE LENGTH OF ALL CHINESE DEFENSIVE WALLS BUILT OVER THE LAST 2,000 YEARS IS APPROXIMATELY 30,070 MILES.
THE EARTH'S CIRCUMFERENCE IS 24,854 MILES.

The Great Wall

learn how to remove pants. Something else I learned about young kids in China was that parents like their children to have flat heads at the back. I never got the full story. I must look online when I get home.

As I was chopping the wood, I turned to see the woman of the house throwing something around in the air and then bashing it on the floor. It was a toad. Ten minutes later it was cooked in a bowl with some pork and salad. I took some pork and salad, and commented on how nice it was, but the gran kept pointing to the bowl of toad. I said I was okay with the pork, at which point she basically wrestled with me and forced a piece into my mouth. That isn't normal, is it? Hardly the sort of thing you see on *Come Dine with Me*. I yelled at her, which I suppose is a bit rude, but I didn't like being force-fed toad. I told her that the baby needs help being fed, not me. I grabbed some and forced it in her face. She didn't seem too happy about it either. I wouldn't be surprised if no one eats toad in China, and it's just something Ricky and Steve sorted out to wind me up.

I left the village and saw more of the Wall that afternoon. As I got higher up, my phone picked up a message. It was from Steve.

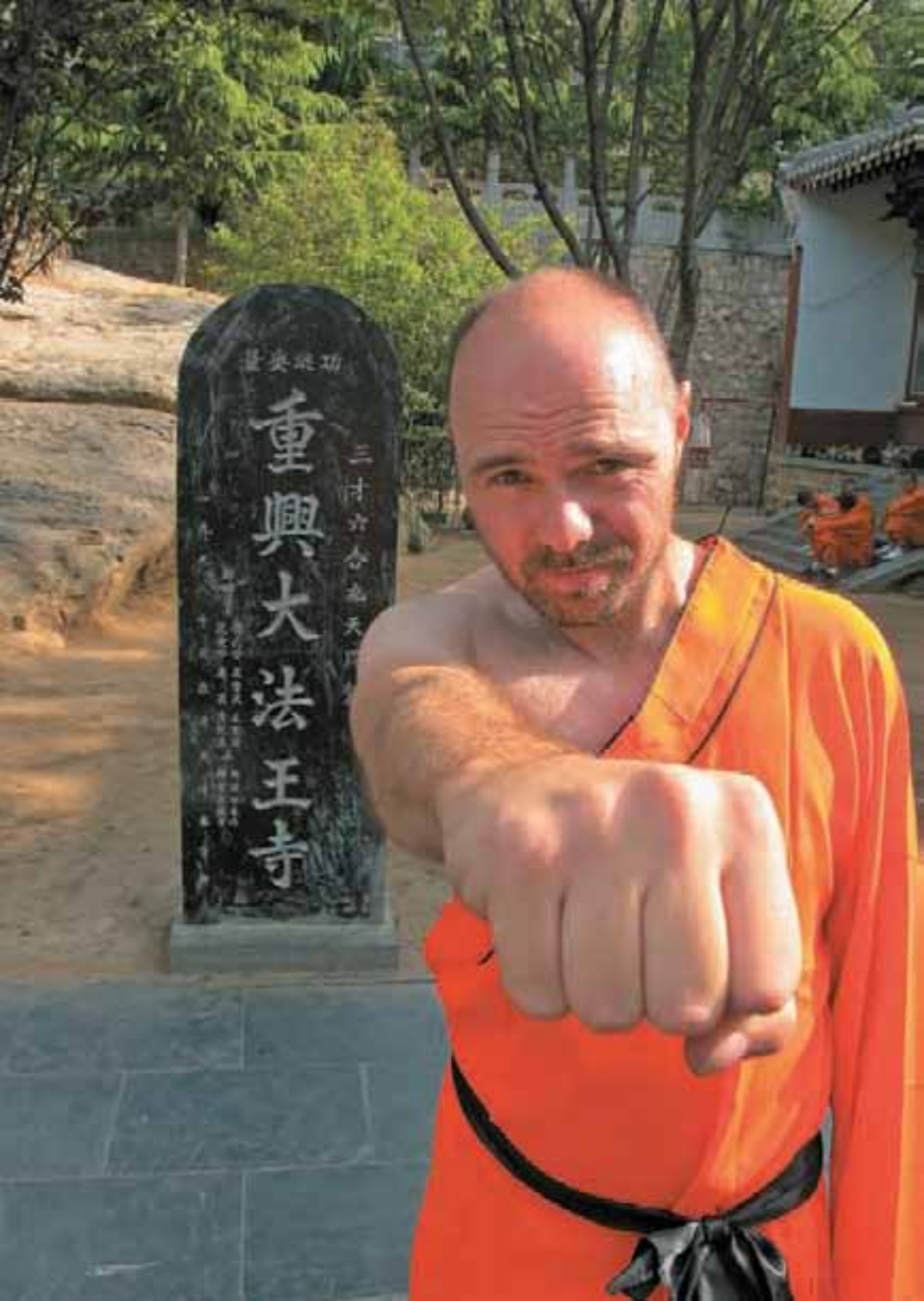
HELLO, MATE, IT'S STEPHEN HERE. HOPE YOU'RE DOING WELL. JUST WANT TO LEAVE YOU A QUICK MESSAGE. WE'VE SORTED SOMETHING OUT FOR YOU - ONE OF THE GREAT ELEMENTS OF CHINESE CULTURE AND POPULAR OF COURSE IN THE UK IN THE 1970S. WE'VE ARRANGED FOR YOU TO SEE SOME KUNG FU. YEAM, ENJOY IT! SEE YA.

Great.



FRIDAY 30TH APRIL

Saw more of the bloody Wall today on the way to the kung fu school. I don't have much more to say about it. Krish tried to sell it to me by



功

重興大法王寺

三才六合也天

saying it's impressive because it's so long, but so is the M6, and that's older than a lot of this Wall.

We got to the Shaolin School where they teach kung fu. It's not something I've ever been into – kung fu, or any martial art for that matter. I've always thought it just made fights longer than they need to be. Any kung fu film where you see a fight can go on for ages. I bet most of the time people who have a fight in China forget what the argument was about by the time they've finished fighting. There can only be one winner so why not just get it done sooner? To me it's like people who have it away all night. I had some neighbours like that once; they'd be at it all night. Why? Get the job done and get to sleep.

When we arrived at the Shaolin School there were kids everywhere doing kung fu. All in sync and all wearing the same uniform. It was nothing like PE lessons at my school. Most of that lesson used to be spent in Lost Property trying to find shorts that fitted me. No one remembered their own kit. It was more like Trinny and Susannah than a PE lesson.

A man called Leo introduced himself and said he would give me a guide around the place. He was a teacher and kung fu expert who explained why the art is such a big deal in China and how training methods can produce extraordinary skills and abilities.

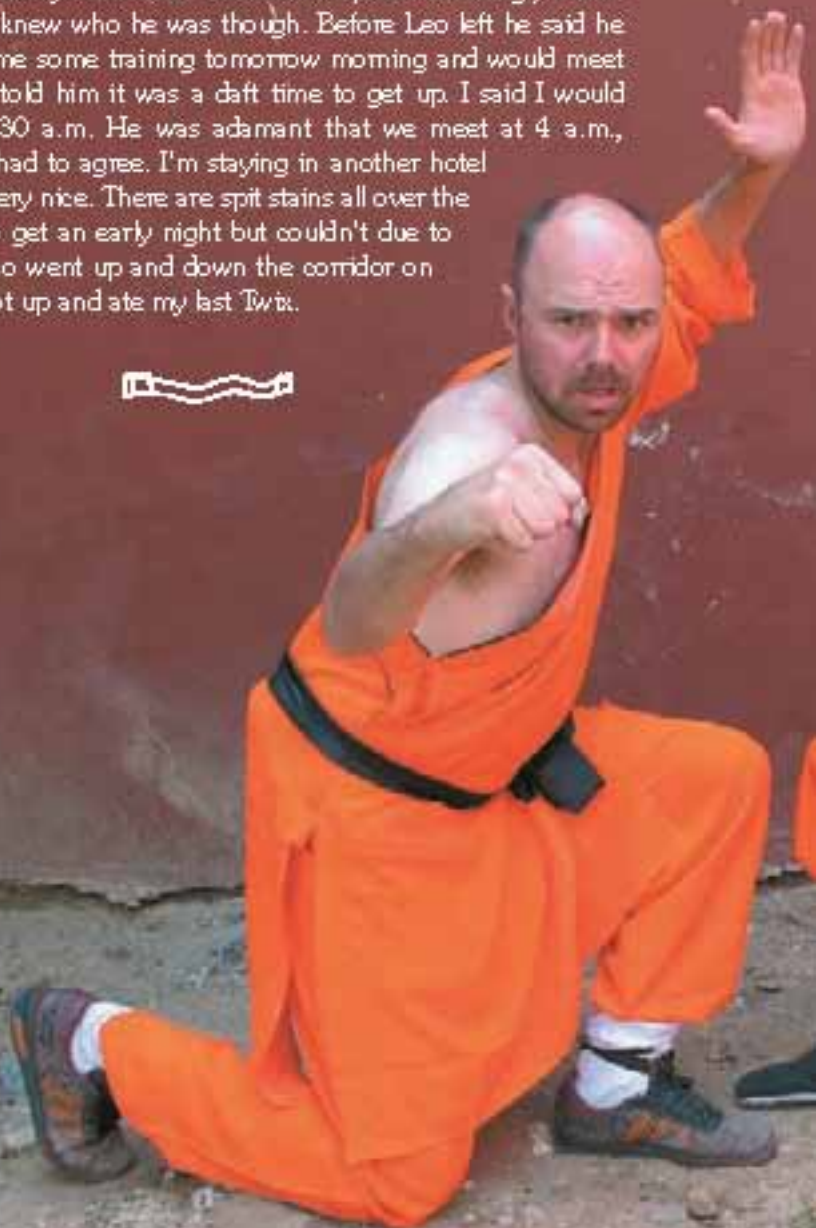
First he took me up into the hills, where there were four students who demonstrated some of their skills. One smashed a wooden pole over another's back, another broke a metal bar on his head, and one bent a sharp spear using the ground and his neck. I didn't see the point of some of these tricks. I told Leo the only one I thought that might come in handy was smashing the metal bar, as I'm always banging my head, but he told me the spear to the throat was useful too, as the throat is one of the most sensitive parts of the body and this activity makes it stronger. At that moment Leo went and poked me in my throat with two fingers. I didn't even see it coming. It took my breath away for a moment. He was fast. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd checked my prostate gland at the same time.

The youngest of the students was a ten-year-old lad with a runny nose who did a forward roll and bounced off his head. This kid didn't smile much. I don't think he liked being at this school. Leo said the lad practised

An Idiot Abroad

landing on his head every day and it would help strengthen his neck. At the moment it just looks like it's helping clear the snot out of his nose.

Leo kept telling me that a healthy body makes a healthy mind. I told him this is not always the case. 'Look at Stephen Hawking', I said. I don't think he knew who he was though. Before Leo left he said he wanted to give me some training tomorrow morning and would meet me at 4 a.m. I told him it was a daft time to get up. I said I would meet him at 5.30 a.m. He was adamant that we meet at 4 a.m., so in the end I had to agree. I'm staying in another hotel tonight. It isn't very nice. There are spit stains all over the carpet. I tried to get an early night but couldn't due to a kid outside who went up and down the corridor on a tricycle, so I got up and ate my last Twix.

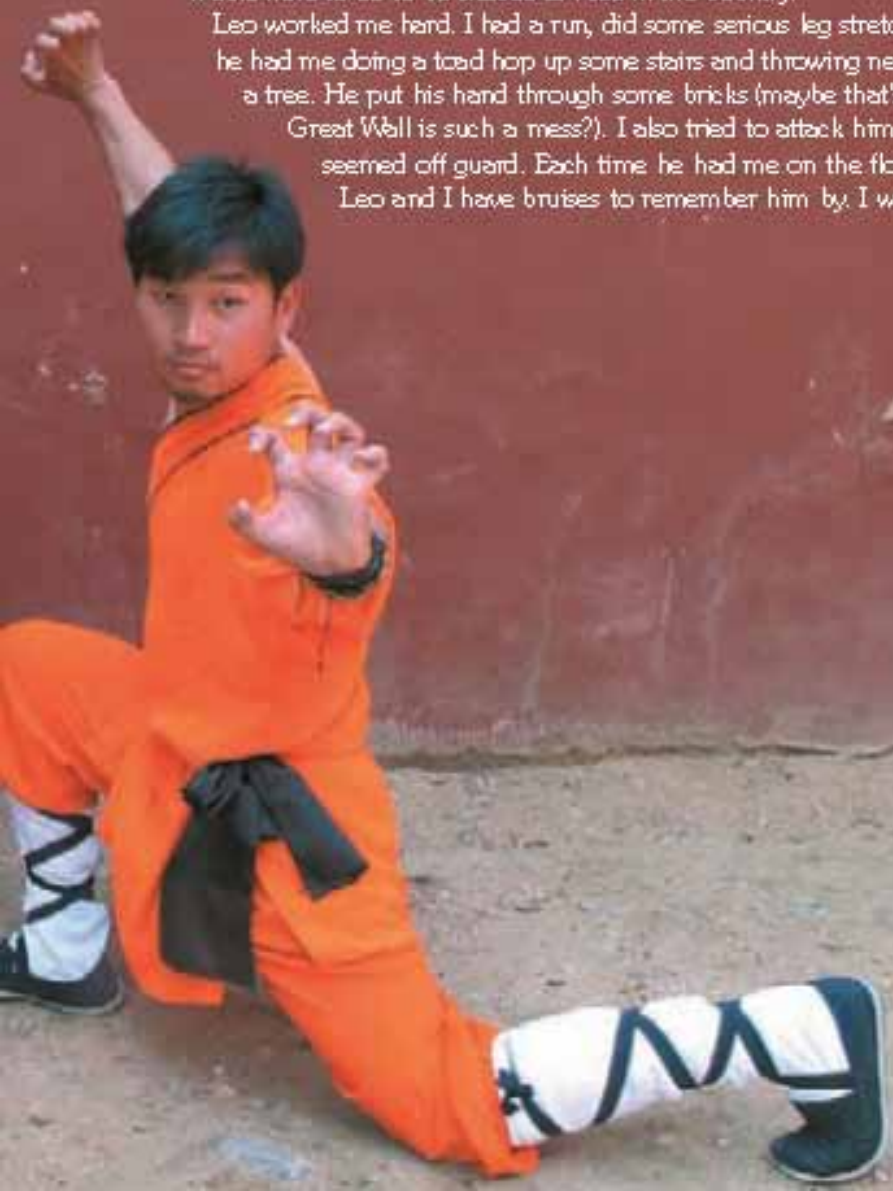


SATURDAY 17 MAY

I was woken at 4:05 this morning by violent banging on my door. It was Leo. He told me I was late, handed me my outfit and stormed off.

He had relaxed a bit by the time I got in the van, but not as much as the driver, who broke wind twice during a 15-minute journey. It's amazing how acceptable spitting and farting seem to be. I don't know what you would have to do to be classed as rude in this country.

Leo worked me hard. I had a run, did some serious leg stretches, then he had me doing a toad hop up some stairs and throwing needles into a tree. He put his hand through some bricks (maybe that's why the Great Wall is such a mess?). I also tried to attack him when he seemed off guard. Each time he had me on the floor. I liked Leo and I have bruises to remember him by. I was aching





WARM-UP EXERCISES AT THE SHAOLIN SCHOOL.



IT'S MURDER GETTING THESE SHOES OFF.



AN AMAZED CROWD LOOKS ON.



The Great Wall

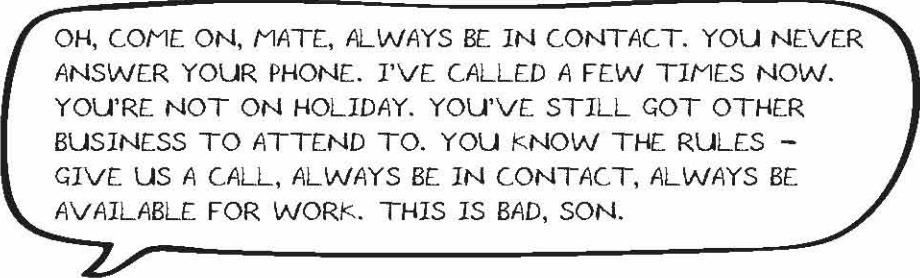
a lot, so Krish said that the Chinese are into massage stuff and I should take advantage of having one as it would do me good after the workout I'd been having.

On the way to the massage we stopped off at a little café. It was a bit rank, but there was nothing else around and we were hungry, as we'd been up since 4 a.m. Loads of plates were brought to the table. I tucked in. Then Emma the translator walked in and told me I'd been eating dog. If the camera had been rolling I'd have thought I had been set up, but it wasn't, and everyone else looked at their plate to see if they had eaten it too. They hadn't. Just me. Just my luck. It didn't taste that good. I just thought it was cheap beef. Even food that I have at home tastes different here, so I didn't really question what it was.

Oh, well. Isn't there a saying that goes 'You can't keep an old dog down'? Guess I'll find out in the next few hours. Over at the massage place, I entered a really warm room that seemed to have way too much furniture in it for its size. I was greeted by a woman who asked me to remove my trousers and gave me some shorts. She rubbed my legs and feet, which was lovely. And then she set fire to them. Mental.

She dipped some rags into some type of oil and then placed them on my legs and set fire to them. I've no idea what good it does. I should be able to relax when having a massage but instead I was yelling me head off while looking for a fire extinguisher. She didn't stop though. You'd have thought that, even though she couldn't understand English, me yelling my head off would indicate that I wasn't happy. Like I've said, the Chinese mess with everything for the worse.

I was pissed off with Krish for putting me through that and then got even more wound up when I picked up a message from Ricky.



OH, COME ON, MATE, ALWAYS BE IN CONTACT. YOU NEVER ANSWER YOUR PHONE. I'VE CALLED A FEW TIMES NOW. YOU'RE NOT ON HOLIDAY. YOU'VE STILL GOT OTHER BUSINESS TO ATTEND TO. YOU KNOW THE RULES - GIVE US A CALL, ALWAYS BE IN CONTACT, ALWAYS BE AVAILABLE FOR WORK. THIS IS BAD, SON.

How can he still be so annoying when he's so far away?
I called him when I got to the next hotel.

HOW'S IT GOING?

WHY HAVEN'T YOU CALLED? DID YOU GET MY MESSAGE?

YEAH, I GOT YOUR MESSAGE, BUT I'VE BEEN IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, HAVEN'T I, LOOKING AT THE WALL.

NOT REALLY IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. THERE'S A BILLION PEOPLE IN THE PLACE YOU'RE IN, SO I DON'T THINK YOU COULD EVER BE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE.

WELL, WHEN YOU SEE IT YOU'LL SEE HOW LONELY I'VE BEEN. I'VE BEEN IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE LOOKING AT A WALL. IT'S REALLY WEIRD HERE.

WHY?

JUST... EVERYTHING. EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS HERE, IT'S JUST WEIRD. IT FEELS WEIRD. THE ATMOSPHERE'S WEIRD. EATING TOAD WAS WEIRD.

YOU DIDN'T EAT TOAD?

I HAD A LITTLE BIT OF TOAD.

I THOUGHT THAT WAS A MYTH. I DIDN'T REALISE THEY REALLY DID EAT TOAD THERE. I THOUGHT YOU JUST MADE THAT UP.

A WOMAN FORCED ME TO HAVE A BIT OF TOAD. I WAS WORRIED ABOUT GETTING A TASTE FOR IT. THAT WON'T BE HAPPENING. WHAT ELSE HAVE I BEEN UP TO? TOILETS. DO YOU KNOW HOW WHEN I GO INTO A PUBLIC TOILET I NIP IN WITH A COIN AND OPEN THE DOOR? WELL, YOU COULDN'T DO THAT HERE, 'COS THERE'S NO DOORS ON THE TOILETS.



I WAS WALKING DOWN THE ROAD THE OTHER DAY, AND THEY WERE FILMING SOME STUFF ON THIS STREET, TRAFFIC AND STUFF. I SAY, 'I'M JUST NIPPING IN HERE.' WALKED IN, WAS GREETED BY TWO FELLAS SQUATTING.

WHAT DID THEY SAY?

WELL, TO THEM IT'S NORMAL, SO THEY JUST SORT OF GAVE ME THE NOD. I WANDERED IN, AND STRAIGHT AWAY... WHEN YOU OPEN THE DOOR YOU DON'T TURN A CORNER OR ANYTHING, YOU WALK IN, AND THEY WERE JUST SAT THERE. THEY WERE CHEFS FROM THE PLACE ON THE CORNER, SO THAT'S REASSURING.

OH, NO. UNBELIEVABLE.

HONESTY TO GOD, ONE OF THEM WAS ON THE PHONE TAKING AN ORDER. I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT. I DON'T THINK I COULD EVER GET USED TO THAT. YOU NEED TO HAVE YOUR OWN SPACE WHEN YOU'RE DOING THAT. AND THEY'RE JUST THERE, ONE'S ON THE PHONE, THE OTHER ONE'S JUST SORT OF LOOKING AROUND.

THAT'S UNBELIEVABLE.
ARE YOU IMPRESSED WITH THE WALL?

IT'S NICELY DONE, BUT THEN AGAIN IT SHOULD LOOK ALL RIGHT - THE BIT I SAW THEY DID UP IN THE EIGHTIES.

THE OLDEST BITS ARE HUNDREDS OF YEARS OLD. WHAT DID THEY DO, JUST WALLPAPER AND PLASTER OVER IT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN THEY DID IT UP?



THEY DID IT UP AND MADE IT NICE, AND IT'S JUST LIKE ANY WALL THAT YOU'D SEE ANYWHERE. THERE'S NOTHING SPECIAL ABOUT IT. IT'S THE CHINA WALL BECAUSE IT'S IN CHINA. IT'S NOT GREAT. I DON'T KNOW WHY THEY USE THE WORD 'GREAT' IN IT.

WERE THERE LOADS OF PEOPLE ON BICYCLES?

NOT THAT MANY, BUT THEN THE FEW I'VE SPOKEN TO HAVE HAD OLD RELATIONS WHO'VE BEEN, LIKE, KNOCKED OVER ... ONE FELLA LOST A LEG, FROM BEING ON A BIKE. SO I THINK THEY MUST HAVE CUT DOWN ON THE NINE MILLION BICYCLES. I SAW ONE GET CRUSHED BY A VAN, SO THERE'S DEFINITELY NOT NINE MILLION. IT'S AT LEAST ONE LESS.

I DON'T THINK YOU SHOULD GET ALL YOUR INFORMATION ABOUT CHINA FROM KATIE MELLIA SONGS EITHER. I DON'T KNOW IF THAT ONE'S OFFICIAL.

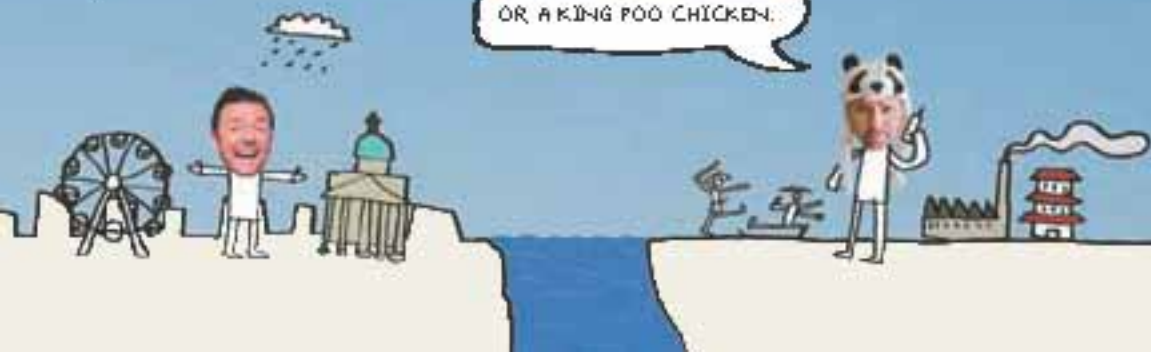
WELL, I KNEW NOTHING ABOUT THIS PLACE BEFORE I CAME HERE. PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SAYING 'OH, WELL, WHAT DID YOU THINK? WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?' I KNEW NOTHING. I WAS THINKING ABOUT THE PHILIP BAILEY SONG 'CHINESE WALL'. HE CERTAINLY DIDN'T SAY IT WAS BUILT IN THE 1980S. I THINK THAT SONG'S OLDER THAN THE WALL ... HONESTLY, I'VE HAD ENOUGH. I WANT TO COME HOME NOW.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT PEOPLE WATCHING SKY ARE GONNA DO WITH THE INFORMATION ON CHINESE PEOPLE HAVING A SHIT WITH NO DOOR WHILE TAKING AN ORDER FOR FOOD. BUT, YOU KNOW, IT'S THE TRUTH.

IT IS THE TRUTH.

ALL I'M TAKING FROM THIS IS, THE NEXT TIME I ORDER A TAKEAWAY I'M GONNA ASK THE FELLA 'WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?' I'M NEVER GONNA ORDER A NUMBER TWO, I TELL YOU THAT.

OR A KING POO CHICKEN.





mainly St Bernards. He said these big dogs can easily feed a big family. St Bernards are the ones you normally see as rescue dogs with a drum of brandy round their neck. The Chinese probably look at this as a meal with a free drink. The man who ran the dog farm then got out a brochure with the different dogs that people eat.

I decided to have a word with him through our translator. 'It's weird, because you've got a dog yourself. It's odd to see big dogs trapped in small spaces. Yet your dog runs free. I didn't think you'd be a dog lover, really.'

The translator said, 'My pet is different from all those dogs, because he's specially for guarding the gate.'

'Right. Yeah. And how's business? Is it busy? Lot of people want to eat dog here?'

The translator replied, 'A lot of different people come to buy the dogs. Big ones and small ones, because I have all kinds of dogs.'

'What's your dog's name?'

'Fluffy.'

'You wouldn't sell this one then?'

'I've trained him already, so I wouldn't sell.'

'So what happens now? If I wanted to buy one of these dogs, would I buy it and take it away, or do you kill them and prepare them for somebody to sell as food?'

The translator said, 'We only do the farming here. We don't kill the dogs. So, if somebody wanted to buy one, they would take it away and kill it.'

I asked him if it was one of his favourite meats.

'China has a long history of dog eating.'

'Do you enjoy it? I had it and I thought it was like beef. I couldn't tell the difference.'

'Dog meat tastes very different from beef. We have a minority of North Koreans. They love eating dog.'

I asked him if it was a poor man's food.

'You eat it no matter if you're poor or rich. But my pet, my Fluffy I would never eat him. If he died, I could never eat him.'

'See that's the bit I don't understand really. Surely, when it's your own dog, you know where it's been and how it's lived. So, I think

An Incident Abroad

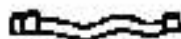
that would make it easier for me to eat it than eating a dog that I know nothing about. And what about cat? Do people eat cat here?'

'Cats – normally we use them as pets and I can never remember anybody eating cats.'

I don't understand that really. To me it's just the same. If you're eating dog I don't see the problem in eating a cat. If anything it's easier 'cos they're not as friendly, cats . . . they sort of come and go as they please.'

The translator explained. 'Because cats are quite small, and there's not much meat on them, but in Guangdong Province people do eat cats as well.'

Of course they do.



MONDAY 3rd MAY

When I got home I checked online about the thing I heard about babies having square heads. Apparently, sometimes a book is tied round the back of the baby's head to help flatten it. Parents do this because a flat head is a sign of beauty. I also read that it stops babies rolling about when they're in a cot.

Bizarre.







