



CHRONICLES OF AN ADVENTURE, TRIP, AND BIKE RACE IN CHINA

by Adam Farabaugh

This is a sort of short book that I will post into blog posts for easier sharing. It is not a quick read so a PDF download is also available. Upon completion, I will post it in its entirety. Also, check out the site that this is listed on for peer-to-peer, locally guided cycling trips. A good friend of mine and I have just launched it and are trying to make it a big deal. Thanks for reading and your support!

October 9, 2014

8:17am San Francisco Airport: International Terminal

Drinking a Pete's Coffee and eating an apple while waiting for my flight to Beijing, China. Getting up early is always undesirable especially when it's 3:30 in the morning but the sacrifice better always be worth it. This morning it was worth it, not only because I'm headed somewhere, but for the reasons I love the early morning so much.

The flight left in the pitch black which quickly drew me back to a deep sleep but the loud speaker announcement woke me to an incredible deep red and orange horizon that seemingly stretched 180 degrees. It illuminated the low clouds/fog that's signature to San Francisco, where I was connecting. The bay showed through in places reflecting what was yesterday a full moon. Over the foggy parts, city lights illuminated the clouds above giving it a "heat map" type look of where the populated areas were.

Lucky to be on this Trip.

Are you lucky or just good? Can it be a combination? Maybe just good enough to be in the right position to then be lucky.

I was trying to get a job after my last race in September and was just going to race 'cross and have fun doing whatever. Quick employment never came to fruit so coming across a friend's post on Facebook about looking for someone to go do a race in China, I was like why not. First stroll of luck; being available to just up and go half way around the world for a couple weeks. First stroll of good; being a solid enough of a rider to be quickly considered for the composite team.

Being a last minute, thrown together team, we had to act fast to get plane tickets, visa's, hotel confirmations and sort out logistics. Our first problem was that the race was in China and that there was seemingly no information on the race anywhere let alone a website for it. We knew the name of the race and roughly where in China it was (due to the race's name). We didn't know the city it actually started in, when it started, when it finished or where, along with what the actual logistics of the race would be. We, or rather the other American I kind of knew, was talking with some guy in Serbia who had a team or maybe a couple of riders thrown together. He said he would pay for our flights and visa's and that there was a lot of prize money between the two races, \$200,000Usd. I still don't know what the second race we're doing is.

So even with the massive lack of detail and even the assurance that we'd actually get any money back, let alone make money, we set off to fill the blanks, get flights, of which you have to book before you even get your visa, and then hopefully actually get that visa.

The visa proved to be the most difficult and stressful part of the logistics to go on the trip. First they take a while, four or so days, two if rushed, and you have to go to the Embassy yourself, entrust someone, or hire a visa agent. I hired an agent, of which costs more money. Even with just over a week until we were slated to leave, it was going to be close. To make matters more difficult, it was a Chinese Holiday the Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday we were hoping to use to get it in time. So our applications couldn't even be accepted until the following Monday where they would be backed up because of the Holiday so two day processing was pushed to three

I was leaving Thursday morning and my visa wasn't going to have left the visa office yet let alone be in the mail. And that's just getting it back; I still don't know if it's going to be approved.

The Endless Chase for More

I had just moved to Bend, Oregon following my last race not a month ago. I was fairly tight on cash, which seems to be a theme among aspiring big time bike riders, but sold my team bike, power-meter, and got some refunds back from the team so even though I still hadn't landed a job, I was alright. Finally I was not worried too much about my lack of funds. I landed a cheap good place to live, got a 'cross bike, and was doing some incredible hiking and backpacking with an even more incredible person; life was great and I was comfortable and headed into a great off-season.

Something about us cyclists or maybe not even cyclists but travel and adventure junkies, is that you're always looking for more. Where I was at was good, actually fantastic, but given

the opportunity to go someplace far you haven't been before, on someone else's dime, and maybe even make a little money in the process... of course I'm going to jump on it.

At first it didn't look like I was going to have to spend all the money I just amassed to go but to get my visa in time I was going to shell out yet more coin that I'm not even sure that I'll get back. I was either going to have to change my flight the day before I was to leave, getting me to the start city late on the night before the race or see if I could somehow get same-day delivery of my visa. Astonishingly, Fed Ex was going to be able to make it happen via their shipping agreements with commercial airlines. However they needed the package by 1PM New York City time, which was the Chinese Embassy I had to go through. The Embassy though wasn't going to have it ready until that morning. The visa agent then had to pick it up, or rather some 115 visa's total, get back to their office via subways and send it out. It was ready to send at 12:45PM and was picked up by Fed Ex fifteen minutes later. Close.

With the arrival of my passport with the approved visa on the last flight into Bend's Redmond Airport that same day, I could pick it up the following morning at the ticket counter. And oddly enough it was the same counter that I checked in and got my boarding pass with. It doesn't get much closer than that.

I was incredibly lucky to get the sucker in time but I'd like to think that I was also good enough in dealing and communicating with all parties involved, all of which took hours when all said and done. But I got it and I'm on my way to China so regardless of how much of a pain and how stressful it was, it was worth it, so far...

October 11, 2014 *Changsha, China - Some 5-Star Hotel*

After what was the longest travel day of my life I finally arrived at a hotel but not in the race city. After a 12+ hour flight from the US, a two hour flight from Beijing, we were to have a two hour drive to the race hotel in Pingxian.

In looking for my bike bag at baggage claim I stumbled into my other American teammate and other friend. We were all zombies and were lucky that we just ran into each other. We found the race personnel who were to take us to the host city but apparently they lost a vehicle. Fortunately they just put us up in a 5-star hotel in Changsha, the city we just arrived in.

The drive from the airport in bizarre locations is always interesting, especially when it's in the middle of the night. Even though it was late we still rolled past open street market vendors whose food smelled amazing. I've been told only to eat the hotel race food but by the end of this trip for sure I'm going to try some.

Seemingly in any non-first world country people have zero regard for their safety. We saw hosts motorcycles zipping by into oncoming traffic playing chicken with the opposing cars. One guy even went into head-on traffic on a highway to avoid a toll gate.

Waking up in a new land is incredible. We saw a bit driving in the night before but it was dark. The hotel room we had was on the eighth floor which gave us a good view of the surroundings. Despite being a 5-star hotel, straight outside and across the street was what you would think of China; old run-down buildings all seemingly under construction. Below the building in the street is a constant bustle of cars, motos, scooters, the occasional human powered cart and of course stray dogs. Just behind these buildings are farm fields, trees, and other buildings leading into small foothills.

One of the biggest things I was stoked for going into this race was the food. For breakfast was a buffet style splattering of everything. I started breakfast of course with coffee but they make it with milk and sugar so black's not an option at least here. With coffee they had a bunch of little pastry type goodies; my favorite being the cinnamon bun style pastry but with steamed dough and an egg wash topping. Delicious. The main dishes included some sort of crispy fish, a number of steamed dough pieces that were amazing especially with a sort of fruity spread. Probably one of my favorite Asian foods is the meat filled dumplings. Also another favorite is the rice noodles, Pad-Thai style, stir-fried, especially with a fried egg. They also had four different varieties of soup. I had an amazing coconut one with these little bobo balls like tapioca. The others I had were, I'm not sure what, but good; hopefully breakfast these next few weeks will be similar.

Driving the two hours from the airport city to the start city gave us a great opportunity to actually take in the sights as once we're racing the sites aren't going to be enjoyed as much. The roads and highways here are actually a lot better than I expected. Not a pothole to be seen. The highway we took was through rolling and steep tree-covered hills rising into higher mountains further off in the distance. In the small valleys between were small farm fields outskirted by these sweet narrow country roads that we would ride later in the day. When there weren't trees or fields there were towns and cities that all seemed newer and better than you would imagine. A lot of it seems like people are living there before it's actually ready. Everywhere are endless amounts of new high-rises.

When we left for our ride we were immediately on this main road that seemed fairly new. It had three lanes in either direction but then a separate bike lane/moto lane which made riding on busy, crazy roads a bit safer and less hectic. Getting through the intersections though was crazy. A number of the ones we went through had red lights that also looked to be brand new but weren't on. It was like everything was built but not yet open but people were going ahead and using it.

Despite all the busy roads we were able to find our way out of town pretty quickly after passing a number of just being built high-rises that took over the entire surrounding area. The roads we were on kept getting sweeter and sweeter. We would be rolling through farm fields immediately followed by small clusters of houses and the occasional shop which makes for these neat little towns. We were riding in the afternoon and the schools had just gotten out so there were a lot of kids, mostly five to ten years old, walking home. The one we passed had just let out so we saw where it was and what it looked like. Pretty neat.

Our ride took us up this valley that continued to get smaller and smaller as well as more off the beaten path. We kind of kept taking roads that looked smaller and sweeter which took us on this one lane wide concrete road that wound up this creek valley and then just pretty

much went up the mountain with some switchbacks and all. The views down were incredible with endless rolling hills leading into other mountains in the distance but the smog quickly obscured the distance. The road we took only went half-way up the mountain (unless it looped down and around to come back up the other side) but as it rolled down there were a couple of new nice houses followed by a ramshackle little town. When we rode back through here, ten or so little kids started chasing us up the road screaming in excitement. They probably had never really seen such a sight. Further out we came across this massive bamboo forest that had probably eight inch thick trunks. I couldn't help but wonder if there were baboons, gorillas, and the like around.

Also up in these hills was a pig farm that we stopped and checked out. Cool seeing the different ways people farm and this was one I'd eat pork from. The worst part about this ride was turning around since we did and out and back to not get lost. I easily could have ridden six hours or more just checking stuff out. It seemed and in fact was virtually endless.

October 12, 2014

Race Day #1 Anyuan, Pingzian Stage

For one reason or another, the races started every day at 9AM which makes for some early morning wake ups but it doesn't really matter what time it is as we're getting up when we should be going to bed. The race started with a huge ceremony with music and a lot of people in matching robes all performing the same dance. Pretty impressive. It was a bit like the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony although not quite that big.

The race started with a neutral rollout to the circuits which were around eight k totaling a short eighty kilometers. The course was pretty flat with a handful of wide turns, a bunch of U-turns, and a couple k false-flat with a bit of a kicker in it to the finish.

Not knowing how the legs were going to be with the massive days of travel and having a month of hiking, backpacking, and getting ready for a bit of a 'cross season, along with filling my indulgences for sweets, I started the race pretty conservatively and got the legs going the first couple of laps at the back.

This race at large is flat and fast and everyone seemed to be anticipating a bunch sprint. I definitely thought the same just how moves were going with five or so guys but the next guy that would try to bridge would tow the whole field bringing it all together again.

Our composite team of two Americans, a Serbian, a Norwegian, a Slovenian, and a New Zealander who now lives in China, rode well together covering moves but not spending too much energy. I departed ways with the back and started following moves which landed me in a chase group without much effort. Another teammate made it up to us and we quickly caught the guys ahead making a break of ten. Everyone worked well together and we grew the gap to a minute. I didn't feel like we were going too hard but we must have been moving because on the three U-turn course we could see how the field looked and it always looked pretty strung out chasing.

It became apparent with a lap or two to go that this was going to be the move to the line but more or less everyone kept working well together. The finish definitely didn't suit me with a false flat into a bit of a kicker along with not having a great high end from my month of escapades, so I was to try and set it up for my teammate who had a good uphill kick. Setting it

“up” though was my chance to win the race, solo. The last U-turn was about a k out from the finish and I attacked hard hoping to get a gap and continue on. One dude got my wheel and I continued to go but wasn’t about to drag him to the line after he declined to pull through, so I sat up. I got back on some decent wheels but after my effort I wasn’t coming around anyone. Fortunately that set the sprint up well and my teammate was able to navigate to the win giving us the leader’s jersey in the process. I finished eighth.

Perhaps the biggest spectacle to the day was the podium ceremony. First, there were a ton of people. Along with that was a host of media taking tons of photos and getting a lot of interviews. All the people wanted photos of us and with us like we were celebrities. (I couldn’t help but think back to an awesome performance by the *Lee Koch Trio* in Bend, Oregon where they played “Celebrities” which has a line along the lines of “we don’t need no celebrities”. Great music.) They were all super excited so you obliged which brought even more people to get photos with you. It was actually pretty sweet but I could see how it would get old quick.

Another, not spectacle but abnormality to the race compared to others, was that our transfer that afternoon to the next hotel was a massive caravan procession of literally sixty to eighty vehicles (every team, twenty teams of six, was given a brand new and matching caravan SUV, and a van for the bikes and luggage. Furthermore, there were maybe five or ten bus like vans for the staff, media, and Red Bell girls.) Literally as I write this we are two vehicles wide on a highway and you can’t see the front and we aren’t at the back. I guess it makes it a lot easier and safer for sure, but they close the roads, highways and all, for us to get to the next hotel as well as the race starts. Pretty impressive to say the least and just goes to show how big of a deal this race is.

To add another spectacle to the day we stayed at a brand new 5-star hotel; The Red Forest Hotel, which was easily the nicest hotel I’ve ever stayed in. To go with the incredibleness, we were on the 22nd floor with floor to ceiling windows overlooking a built city along with a never ending amount of new construction. I counted twenty-four cranes from our window. Invest in whoever’s making cranes in China... The sweetest sight though along with the hills and mountains in the distance was this pagoda on top of this high and steep tree covered hill close to the city. It had multiple curved up roves and was at the very pinnacle of the hill. I wanted to go and check it out so bad and should have but ended up not which I’m already regretting.

I came to the race with two main goals; experience China and make money. It is and is going to be a delicate balance as I do want to go check out all these places but having a good ride yesterday and always wanting good legs, resting and giving myself the best opportunity to do well and make money is also a high priority. I am though experiencing the food and not limiting myself whatsoever. This is probably the best variety of food and tastes I’ve ever had. Sure I’ve had great food but when it’s every meal of the day and in unlimited quantities, it’s hard to be beat. Good thing it’s the end of the season and that this race is super flat.

Staying at that hotel also really showed how China is changing. I remember people saying you could ride your bike around the ring roads in Beijing and not have a car in sight a few years ago. Now it’s full of traffic. They’ve built, and are building, all these new hotels, high rises, economic zones in some areas, in anticipation of what’s to come. It also puts to work their massive population. It’s a win-win seemingly until they have everything built and no more

jobs for everyone to fill. I guess that's where they're trying to become a world leader, not just in manufacturing all the general stuff we buy but higher and higher end products. And I guess seeing all those kids yesterday coming home from school is a testament to what this country is going to become.

Currently though it's not quite there as right next to the Florida or Southern California looking condominium complex is the endless smaller apartment buildings that are clearly old and run down, much of what you think China and this part of the world is like.