

Lost in Beijing

The Big Issue

The cabbie offers only a blank stare. I smile and nod encouragingly. I'm trying to reach the Dashanzi Art District, northeast of Beijing, with a scrap of paper torn from a *Time Out* magazine. An uncomfortable silence breaks with a burst of giggles. Mutual bewilderment takes hold. In my attempt to escape the madness of the city, I've managed to get us both lost.

Somewhere between Beijing's fourth and fifth ring-roads the cabbie's mobile phone blasts out a high-pitched tune. With this chirpy phone-a-friend option, the cabbie calls the gallery and asks for directions. Eventually I'm delivered to the heart of Beijing's burgeoning art scene – buried within a jumble of decommissioned 1950s military factories.

The Dashanzi Art District has been described as a “Soho-esque” home to over 50 galleries, artists' studios, design firms, book-shops, restaurants and bars. Cavernous hanger spaces host rave parties and extravagant exhibition openings, amidst the crumbling fixtures and disused machinery of another era. It's a rabbit warren for artists and art-lovers alike.

The sprawling site is as large as a university campus. For every gallery space, there's another dusty ruin waiting to be transformed next-door. Bauhaus-inspired architecture and massive Maoist slogans - remnants from the factories' heyday - provide a slick, industrial backdrop. On a steamy summer's day this air-conditioned enclave is a contemplative labyrinth to explore.

If getting lost in the rubble sounds enticing, there's a much older labyrinth to explore in the heart of Beijing. The sprawling maze of single-storey concrete villages and traditional courtyard homes are known collectively as *hútòngs*. Connected by alleys and laneways, these crumbling but culturally significant homes are shameful and decrepit to some locals. Hosting the upcoming Olympics has provided the impetus for a swift and brutal clean-up.

Traipsing through a tangle of *hútòngs* is not for the faint-hearted; some end abruptly, others disappear around corners. There's no point rushing. One wrong turn can take hours to undo. Besides, there's far too much to see. A steady flow of bicycles and rickshaws wind their way through the wider *hútòngs*; carting crates of beer or perhaps transporting stacks of recyclable waste. Families gather outdoors, sharing meals and chatting with their neighbours.

Hole-in-the-wall delicacies compete with steaming bowls of dumplings and noodles. Meat-on-a-stick wins hands-down. My roaring belly is distracted by a small boy wearing a sailor's hat and a goofy grin as he manoeuvres an open-flamed grill. I'm not sure what I'll be eating - I hardly care - just so long as it tastes half as good as it smells.

While dusty underfoot, from construction as much as decline, there are several leafy *hútòngs*. Some of these have been restored, earmarked for preservation. But there are plenty in muted shades of grey and brown, with a splash of communist-issue red decorating a doorway. *Hútòngs* often house many generations under one roof and families share communal outdoor bathrooms.

During my three week visit, several hùtòngs vanish. On the edge of the second ring road, a laneway expansion project has left a train of rubble in its wake. Strangely, the demolition crew chose to keep the public toilets. The debris is interrupted by a three-metre wide toilet block, glaring with fluorescent lighting and entirely marooned.

Living in a 24 hour construction zone must take its toll on the locals. Many construction workers come onto the scene during the wee hours, amassing confusion for locals and tourists by dawn, when they set out to retrace yesterday's steps.

Meanwhile, commercially-oriented hùtòngs are thriving, littered with tea houses, cafés, bars and restaurants. Tiptoeing up the narrow staircase, careful not to lose my footing, I emerge onto a rooftop lounge, curtained by trees and overlooking Beijing's 13th Century Bell and Drum Towers. Appropriately titled, The Drum & Bell bar offers a birds-eye view of neighbouring hùtòngs as far as the eye can see.

Beijing's high-density living is countered by the parks and gardens which locals flock to on weekends and sticky summer nights. Ditan Park is particularly beautiful - 40 acres of pine and cypress trees set just outside the second ring road, while Jingshan Park offers visitors remarkable views of Beijing and over the Forbidden City. It's easy to forget the raging metropolis beyond the garden gates. Every Sunday, more than 30 choirs meet to practice in Jingshan Park.

Here, you might find yourself entranced by a 20-strong men's opera ensemble, with pitch-perfect harmonies and understated theatrics. But soon enough, the strains of traditional communist-era tunes, while barely audible at first, will become too beguiling to ignore. Each choir is different. From string quartets accompanying female soloists to large gatherings and group sing-a-longs, there's even a lone karaoke singer with a respectable following of slow-dancing oldies.

Many locals also use these parks to exercise. A clapping-while-walking-backward routine (harder than it looks) is a favourite here, while others practice traditional Qigong and Tai Chi. Rarely does anyone sit on the grass. "Please do not disturb me" signs suggest that nature also needs a break from the city.

There are, of course, standard tourist rituals in Beijing: rising early to beat the masses; waiting patiently in snaking queues; fending off feisty hawkers with a curt "bu yao" (no want) - to name but a few. On first impressions, Beijing is a theme park of incessant wheel-of-death roundabouts. A kamikaze training course for tourists; where swift thinking turns into jaywalking nirvana.

The traffic growls as loudly as you might expect from a city with three million vehicles on the road. And the subway in peak-hour is a cosier kind of cattle class than your average long-haul flight. But if you lose yourself in the cacophony of white noise, it's possible to find Beijing's quieter side. As I wait to cross the second ring road, heading for a yoga class instructed in Mandarin, I'm ready for two more hours of blissful incomprehension - just as soon as I reach the other side.

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