

Marathon and Homestay in Chengdu MIA Member Iwamatsu TAEMI

From October 25th to the 29th I visited Chengdu, China to participate in a marathon. It was a short visit but I had lots of encounters and made lots of memories so I want to share some of them with you all. This was my sixth visit to China but there were so many problems this time with entering the marathon lottery and visa applications that I was at the point of giving up. However, with the efforts of my Chinese connections in Chengdu and my travel partner Miura-san, we finally managed to safely depart. But in spite of that, upon arrival to Fukuoka Airport's departure counter, a notice displayed that our plane would depart an hour late along with a message stating "The airline is not responsible for any occurred losses to the customer due to late departure". Ahhh, my bad feeling was right on the money with our plane being further and further delayed and by the time that we arrived in Shanghai, our flight bound for Chengdu had already taken off. Think about it. The feeling of being left behind in a foreign airport at night with no language ability...

Fortunately, we chance-encountered a Shanghai residing Japanese couple, "The T's", who also had their flight delayed. Once we heard that their next flight was also headed for Chengdu, we had them take our tickets as well but were charged an additional fee of 34000 yen per person. At this time, our up until then unusable Wi-Fi antenna came back up so, using a translator app, we appealed "Due to the delay of your company's plane, we weren't able to board our flight for Chengdu", and the additional charges became free. You have to shoot your shot since you have nothing to lose. We became much obliged to Mr. and Mrs. T for helping us re-obtain the tickets and for contacting Biao Li about the time change.

Upon safely arriving in Chengdu, we were able to rendezvous with our host, Biao, at their place. But for me, the next day I was met with a perplexing problem. On top of the marathon, I had another matter to worry about: Miura-san's "Let's try making a meal one time" proposal. What would be good to make in gourmet China...? I received lots of advice and ended up riding the vibes of "I definitely won't fail!" by deciding on a certain company's 'Vermont Curry'. I stocked up on lots of souvenirs and when I eventually opened the Li's fridge, there were two boxes of an unnamed company's 'Vermont Curry' in the doorway. I hurriedly changed to a different curry sauce and started to make it but the Li's separate their knives based on if they are cutting vegetables or meat. I got cold feet and was unable to cut with the square meat-cutter knife that looked like what a Chinese strong-man would use, was perplexed by the burner's heat level that looked like it had a mosquito coil placed on it, the salad (which is just salted kelp mixed with shredded cabbage) became too salty as I tasted it again and again...a pitiful display...In contrast, Miura-san was previously armed with the information that there were raw matsutake mushrooms in Biao's refrigerator so he brought a certain '___en' company's granule matsutake clear broth soup, subdivided mirin, and light soy sauce. He made things from copiously added matsutake Takikomi-gohan to thinly cut lightly floating matsutake soup!!! This alone was an amazing feat but together with the potato salad he's used to making daily and everyone's favorite chicken karaage, he nabbed up the attention and popularity.

Before departing, I was thoroughly warned that "China's cashlessness is 10 years ahead of Japan" but honestly thought it was an exaggeration. But with just one step out of the airport, it turned into a 'QR World'; with your smartphone, all of the nearby running taxis are displayed that are available to reserve. When you enter a restaurant there is a QR code on the table and when you scan it your phone displays the menu. All over downtown there were yellow and chartreuse painted rental bicycles and electric bikes with a QR code in the center of the handle. You would use a code to unlock the bike and ride it all the way to a bike lot near your destination where

you'd pay. Mr. and Ms. Biao are also subscribed for the equivalent of 300 Japanese yen a month to 'all you can ride' so they have no need to buy a bike. Like Tokyo and Osaka, Chengdu is popularized with subways and trains so going to work on the rental bike is truly convenient. We also enjoyed the rental bikes for sightseeing and shopping during our stay. However, for us Japanese, we were pretty nervous until we became a little more used to it. Anyways, the cars and the pedestrians alike were too close. When walking through an intersection, the cars came so close and with such speed that I thought "Are they gonna run me over!?" and even if you ring your bell pedestrians don't dodge out of the way until the last second. But, you quickly get used to it so there is no need for worry.

If you love high-end brand items then this place is a shopping paradise. Chengdu is a frequently visited spot by the rich people living in the surrounding area and in the area where Biao lives there are three fancy malls where high brand goods gather from around the world. Respectively, their innovative and artistic objet d'art overflows with idiosyncrasies so even if you aren't shopping, you can fully enjoy it as tourism. Everywhere until nighttime, modern age fashion garmented young people walked around while stuffing their cheeks with gelato and crepes and even on weekdays it was lively from people taking their families along. Among the impressive things was the "projection mapping" that projects images onto buildings and structures, which has become more common even in Miyakonojo recently. My mind was boggled by the cute pandas and beautiful images projected onto the entirety of the high-rise twin towers, and it was one of the pleasures of my evening strolls.

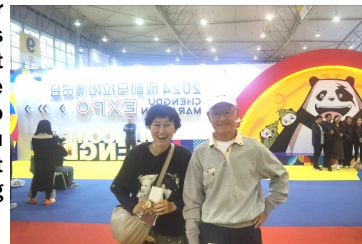
However, for the foodie that I am, what attracted me most were the foodstuffs being sold at the supermarkets and the delicious cuisine that I was treated to at restaurants or at people's homes. Chengdu is located in China's southern part and has plentiful and inexpensive fruit. Fruit like mangos and Shine Muscat in particular were probably about a fifth or tenth of the price they are in Japan. With this trip, I tried for the first time a fruit resembling lychee called "longan" but it had an addictive deliciousness. We were treated to a meal at Biao's friend's house and the sheep stew with garden peas and ample local vegetables and the dragon fruit salad were exquisite.

Oh! I almost forgot! This trip's purpose was to participate in the marathon. Chengdu City's international full marathon and half marathon's start times were 30 minutes apart. Due to that, despite the fact that up until midway through roughly 35000 people were all running simultaneously, the road was one side of a 5 lane highway and was spacious with few 'ups and downs' making it easy to run and is recommended for runners trying for records. Eh? What was my time? It's a secret.

I was delighted to receive, both the day before the marathon at the entry site and along with the race-completion medal, a big bag filled with lots of souvenirs. From things like the wonderful medal, exhaustion recovery compress and tape, water and snacks, to cup ramen and ingredients for hot pot, while tired from the marathon you don't have to go shopping for two to three days.

With this trip, for the entire duration of our stay, together with the support of even their friends, the Li's helped us enjoy our sightseeing without any inconvenience. We are deeply thankful. Thanks to that, I came to love Chengdu more and more. China is vast but, I'm definitely coming again.

Zàijiàn Chengdu!



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- Snow White
- A Complete Unknown
- 35 years Love Letter

- Doraemon: Nobita's Picture World
- Wicked
- Detective Conan: One-Eyed Flashback (from 4/18)
- A MINECRAFT MOVIE (from 4/25)