

BEIJING BLOSSOMS

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COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Peach blossoms herald the coming of spring and the people of Beijing are warming to the new season. Colour is coming back to the city.

The narrow laneways and courtyard homes of the Hutongs hum gently with passing bicycles, corner vegetable stands and steaming fresh dumplings. The rhythm of life is quickening as the days grow longer. With the snow long melted it is easier to get around on two wheels than by walking – metro stations provide parking for bicycles and are near filled to capacity. I can rent myself a bicycle for the entire day for a little under \$3, but I decide against it for fear of becoming hopelessly lost and unable to find this same street corner to return the bike.

Once out of the Hutongs the streets come alive with tourists and souvenir stalls. Statues of Chairman Mao and copies of his little red book appear along side framed dragons, brass buddas, faux jade amulets, sandalwood fans and seals carved from stone with your name written in Chinese. Tucked behind Wangfujing Dajie there are many stalls selling tasty bits of Chinese cuisine, but back on the main street you can find specialised dumpling restaurants with entire menus featuring 'Jiao-zi'; dumplings made from thin pastry and filled with delicious ideas.

Stepping onto Tiananmen Square halts your thoughts for a second while its history and scale sinks in a little. The absence of wind breaks for a kilometre in any direction makes this a great place for flying kites and there is no shortage of sweet old ladies who are eager to sell you one. The larger kites are best left to the experts but the little ones strung up in series can be flown by small children aged five and above – me included.

The best thing about Tiananmen Square is that foreign tourists are regarded as exotic and interesting. Many people who visit the square come from far away provinces of China, eager to see the resting place of Mao Zedong, and may never have before seen blonde hair or white skin. Each time someone grabs at my shoulder and points to their camera I think back to how often I have done something similar on my travels, and so I just smile back and enjoy the brief moment of fame.

To the south of the city centre the Temple of Heaven provides wide open spaces for the pursuit of health and pleasure. Local people come and go to participate in Tai Chi classes, practise their singing or rehearse choreographed routines with ribbons and drums. Where the trees are thickest the older gentlemen like to gather with their caged song birds, removing the shaded covers and allowing their treasured pets to enjoy the surrounds of tree branches and fellow feathered companions.

Just outside the metropolis of Beijing the Summer Palace rests gently into the landscape as an oasis of beauty and harmony. The lake shores alone would make the trip worthwhile, or the extensive imperial gardens for that matter. Add to this a collection of majestic buildings and fine artistry that reveals the discerning eye of Chinese craftsman and the Summer Palace becomes a lasting highlight of Beijing. Early spring adds one more touch of elegance to the setting in the form of peach blossoms. As the afternoon breeze whips off the water, willow branches flow across the horizon and flower petals scatter into the air.

No visit to Beijing would be complete without a day-trip north to visit the Great Wall. Several sites are within reasonable driving distance and within a few weeks the weather will be warm and the landscape green. Mutianyu is a well restored section of wall and easy to visit in a day trip from Beijing, while Simatai is popular for hikers who are travelling west to other sections of the wall. Some sections are better restored than others, and both aspects have their charms. In winter the restored ramparts of the Great Wall provide better protection from cold winds, but in spring and summer the unhindered growth of trees and shrubs makes it easier to appreciate the remarkable endurance of the structure itself.

Having climbed to the second highest tower I turn around to head back. I enjoy one final view of the hills sweeping away in the distance, and next to me is another peach blossom just coming into season.

