

Misfortune cookies

And then it happened...they turned and looked at us.

We had become their nightmare, we had become their irritation. To be fair, we hadn't meant to but the long journey and the lack of sleep had racked up the situation to subconscious competitive levels.

It began with a misunderstanding went onto slight ridicule continued onto disbelief and then graduated to annoyance. The easy steps of 'how to **not** get on with your fellow travellers' in China.

It started when we casually got on the early stupid-o'clock bus from Lijang. We saw some bags on our reserved seats- they belonged to a Chinese- American lady. She was polite and hadn't realised we had seat numbers on the tickets. We smiled and settled ourselves for the journey. Two minutes later a man carrying tiny hot tea cups jumped onto the bus. He looked at us and then shouted down the aisle, 'So glad honey we got here early to get good seats!'

We did an embarrassed British shrug as he shuffled down the aisle to his waving partner.

The bus chugged away and took us through some serious heights. We passed some of the most stunning terraces of rice that glistened and sparkled like ribbons of mercury. Then we went down the other side into the Valley of Hell, like some sepia photo of dystopia. The houses and flats clung to the muddy cliffs and sticky river sides as factory towers vomited beige smoke and pipes emitted brown sludge that slipped into the turgid water.

We stopped for a break and the couple came over for a chat. We were soon all smiles, then the man asked how we were getting on with the language problems. We showed him the little photocopy we had for 'soft sleeper x2' in Chinese characters and various other little phrases we had to help smooth our transactions. He slapped his thigh and laughed, 'That's the funniest thing man!'

'I have my own translator', he nodded at his partner.

We glanced at each other, we'd thought it was useful.

The bus horn went off and we clambered back on. The skinny driver sped off with his tea still held in one hand and a cigarette clamped between mahjong tile teeth.

We hurtled through the evening and just as dusk arrived we screeched to a halt at the train station.

We were to get the last train of the night if there were any seats left. So like the bulls at the gates of Pamplona we raced to the ticket office. We slipped our little piece of paper over the counter and said the destination. The bespectacled lady nodded, half smiled and passed over the tickets. I glanced at our fellow travellers. The ticket booth they were at had closed its blind on the American-Chinese woman. I'd heard that sometimes Chinese people didn't like to speak to 'foreign' Chinese but had never actually seen it in action. They moved to another booth.

We met on the platform.

'Shame all the the soft sleepers were taken', he said.

I took a sneaky look at our tickets - Soft sleeper – printed neatly on the top.

'I think we got some!' I quietly suggested.

He laughed, 'No I think you are mistaken, we were told the last sleeper had gone.'

I shrugged, it was possible. You are never quite sure when you're travelling if things will work out as expected. You just have to trust in the situation.

The train arrived and we parted ways.

Our cabin *was* a soft sleeper with all its usual trimmings, flask of hot water and comfy duvet. We soon unloaded our packs and settled down chatting to our new travelling companions. About an hour later as I was slurping my noodles 'the man' walked past our cabin. He did a double take.

'So you *did* get a soft sleeper.'

We nodded

'Must have got the last two.'

We nodded again

He looked at us eating, tapped the side of the door and walked away.

Night took over and the train rocked us to sleep.

Refreshed we arrived at our destination, a new city and a new adventure. We hopped onto the local bus and saw the other couple get into a taxi. We waved at them. The bus took a circuitous route as we stood at the back swinging round corners with the mop and bucket. Finally we arrived at the hotel, they had one room left. We were told to sit in the foyer while they made the beds. We sat and ordered tea.

Ten minutes later the couple rushed past us to ask for a room.

'Sorry the last room has gone.' The receptionist pointed towards us.

And then it happened ... they turned and looked at us.