

March 27 to March 30

Shanghai

March 27 Auckland to Shanghai

It was the usual story so far as the flight was concerned. We took off on time, landed on time and nothing exciting happened. There were two items worthy of comment. Firstly, the Chardonnay turned out to be Riflemans. If Air New Zealand can afford to offer one of New Zealand's finest wines, they must be making huge profits. Secondly, it was probably the bumpiest flight I have ever had. Not big bumps but almost continuous little ones. In spite of this, I did manage some sleep.

Passage through the formalities at Shanghai was quick and easy. The first problem came when I emerged from customs and tried to find my driver. I wandered around for about twenty minutes before spotting the sign with my name on it.

The vehicle was a large and reasonably smart people carrier. We left the airport and started off on an eight lane motorway through a



An urban view from my room

range of semi-urban countryside. With my camera in the rear of the van, I couldn't take photos. At this stage, we were progressing well. When we entered more built-up areas, the traffic became horrific. We crawled for about an hour before finally arriving at the hotel. The total journey time was about 90 minutes for just over 40 kilometres.

The Broadway Mansions Hotel was expecting me and, even better, had a room ready and available. I made my way upstairs and found a two room apartment with full bathroom and a separate WC. Very smart. I showered, changed, washed my travel clothes and prepared to face the outside world.



The Westin - not an aesthetic masterpiece

My first task was to find the Westin Hotel, where I would join the coach trips for each of the next two days. The paperwork said that it would take me twenty three minutes to do the walk and that proved to be uncannily accurate. Just to allow room for disasters, I decided to allow myself half an hour.



Bikes parked everywhere



Elegant buildings with lots of flowers

My walk had taken me along The Bund, the historical area of the city which had been allocated to several of the European nations. The buildings were elegant and the flowers beautiful. On the opposite side of the road to the buildings is a wide promenade, which forms the embankment to the Huangpu River. There are lots of boats on the river and, on the opposite bank, a vista of modern towers which rivals the Hong Kong waterfront.



The Bund was busy



A skyline to rival Hong Kong

The whole area was heaving on a warm and sunny day. There were lots of people playing wedding photography and lots just wandering around.



Some had a specific purpose



Not Chairman Mao

I had assumed that the large statue was of Chairman Mao but it turned out to be Chen Yi, the first Mayor of the city following the Communist takeover in 1949.



The Waibaidu Bridge & the Broadway Hotel

At the top end of The Bund is the Suzhou Creek, the Waibaidu Bridge and my hotel. I scouted the area for lunch but found nothing.

I crossed the creek in the opposite direction on the Wusong Lu Bridge and walked down some busy roads towards the older part of the city. I found a few restaurants, most very full, before spotting one on a first floor. This had plenty of space.



The view from the Wusong Lu Bridge



Even more bikes on the pavements



Some takeaway dim sum



More chillies than vegetables

My fried beef, which I thought was with vegetables, turned out to be with green chillies, red chillies and dried chillies. Hot but enjoyable. At about £6 with lots of tea, it wasn't expensive.



Electric bikes everywhere

At this stage I should mention the traffic - terrifying. The cars weren't too bad. 95% of the time, they obeyed traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. The bulk of the traffic, however, consists of small motor cycles - mainly electric and silent except for the incessantly beeping horns - and bicycles. They were not hindered by things like traffic lights and were as happy on the pavement as on the road.



Flowers on The Bund

The huge bike parks often blocked the pavement, forcing pedestrians onto the street.



Part of the Imperial Cuisine?

With the temperature high and fatigue beginning to hit hard, I made my way back to the hotel via the waterfront, taking lots more photos as I went. I stopped at a small café under the promenade for a Tsing Tao (small) and a chance to have a rest.



A city full of flowers

Once back at the hotel I had a proper rest and woke up a couple of hours later. Overnight flights aren't good for me!



Interesting electricals here

I was disturbed by a knock on the door and a little girl delivering two large apples on a plate. A nice and healthy touch. I did manage to use the fancy electrical sockets in the room, which appeared to take almost any plug except for a UK one. The European two pin plug worked well and, later on, I used a bit more force and made the US two pin one work. The Antipodean one wouldn't work, probably because it didn't have an earth pin.



Blossom over the creek

I left the hotel just after 17.00. It was cooler but still a good temperature for sight seeing. I followed the creek for a couple of bridges, then headed South in search of dinner. I found all sorts of things, including a fruit shop, a church hidden in the trees and lots more motor bikes.



A back street fruit shop



I wasn't expecting such a large church

I had spotted a restaurant earlier, which had a team in the window making dumplings. I managed to make myself understood and had an interesting mix of cabbage, pork in brown sauce and dumplings. I had thought that the yellow things with the pork would be tomatoes but they had the texture of hard boiled egg yolks. I'm still confused. In spite of this confusion, the pork was extremely good.



Not sure what the yellow things were

I returned to The Bund and found a harbour light show to rival the one in Hong Kong. The area was even busier than it had been in the afternoon. I joined the throngs of photographers and hoped that I would take something reasonable.



More flowers on The Bund



The Oriental Pearl Tower



Harbour lights



Yet another wedding



Broadway Mansions

Back at the hotel, I ate one of my apples, downloaded and processed my photographs and wrote my diary.

Half way through this process I received a phone call confirming my two coach trips but with the wrong information about one of them. The nice lady rang back a few minutes later and confirmed that I would be doing what I thought I would be doing.

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Quite a good night's sleep so I should be able to stay awake on the bus. Booking breakfast in the hotel was a wise move as I will be having a relatively early start on three of my four mornings there and there appear to be few local restaurants in the immediate vicinity.



Views across the bridge and the creek

The breakfast room had magnificent views across the bridge and the creek. The food was a huge mix of Chinese and Western so I had a go at some of the Chinese delicacies. It was OK but not brilliant. Enough to keep me going for several hours.

My walk to the Westin followed the route that I had planned yesterday, where I managed to avoid all the bikes and motorbikes. There were men in uniform at several of the junctions, armed with flags with which, presumably, they were intended to repel the hordes of cyclists. The cars were relatively well disciplined.



A guardian for pedestrians

Once at the Westin, I awaited my fate in the foyer. Just before 08.30 a young man arrived, introduced himself as Bruce and I was introduced to the Australian couple with whom I was to spend the day.



We piled aboard the people carrier

And what a day! Bruce was very good and his driver manoeuvred the seven seater people carrier through the chaotic streets with calmness and fortitude.

We started at the Jade Buddha Temple (the Yufo Temple) home to two jade statues which were brought to the city from Burma in 1882 by a monk who was returning from a pilgrimage to Tibet.



The Yufo Temple

The novelty for me was being able to take photos in the temple, something which isn't allowed in Hong Kong. Only the jade statues may not be photographed as the authorities



Up close and personal

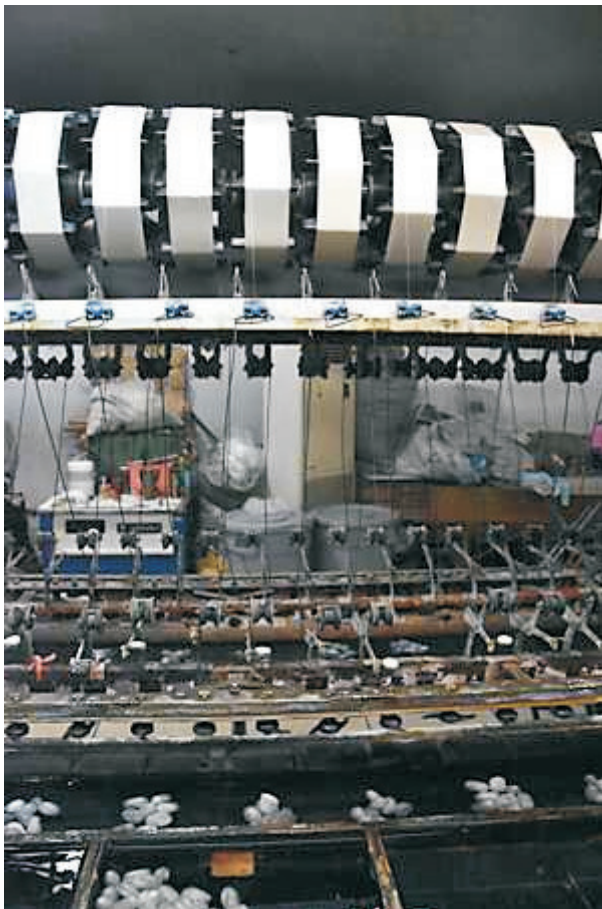


The cocoons are soaked ...

fear that unexpected camera flashes may damage the delicate jade. Bruce gave us a talk on the history of Buddhism and the numerous statues. Most of this, of course, went straight over my head.



Another Buddha



... then spun into thread



There's a dragon on the roof

The silk museum and factory was fascinating as we saw, in detail, the process by which cocoons are spun into silk thread. Each cocoon can generate one kilometre of thread, a mind blowing statistic. The large cocoons are stretched by hand and formed into duvet inners. We were given the chance to buy duvets - about £80 - which is cheap by UK standards but expensive by local ones. The silk covers were spectacular. Very beautiful fabrics.



The large ones are formed into duvets



Shanghai Museum



Canoe from Taiwan

Next stop was the Museum, a spectacular new building in magnificent surroundings in People's Square. Several friends had told me that this was a great place to visit and so it seemed.

The ethnic minorities gallery enabled him to cover the development of China as a unified state, covered the importance of Tibet as the source of much of the nation's water, and the way in which the Han people had come to dominate the others. In spite of this, there were numerous semi-autonomous regions.

We were searched on the way in and I was asked to take a drink from my water bottle to prove that it was what it said on the label.

Bruce told us that he would take us into two of the galleries and use these to illustrate the history of China. His performance was a real tour de force.



From precious metals ...

In the currency section, normally fairly dry material, he linked the moves from rare metals to coins with holes for stringing round the owners arm, to solid coins when people started carrying wallets to the first paper money. It was brilliantly done and I wish I could remember more of it.



Costume from the Chayu region



... to paper



This could have been any city

We had a brief walk through Xintiandi, part of the old French Quarter, which is now the home to numerous trendy restaurants. It could have been in any westernized city in the world. Everywhere was busy. This is definitely a city for spending big sums.



Even the food shops were international

Lunch was in a restaurant on the first floor of a building that we couldn't really see. The food, basically Shanghainese, was excellent. Beef soup, pork, noodles, cauliflower and tomatoes with egg. The latter is a local speciality and tasted far better than I would have expected. We ate a fair proportion of it but felt we needed it after a strenuous morning.



A very good Shanghainese lunch



Wot a splendid Gents

The basins in the Gents were worthy of both a mention and a photograph. Very stylish.



Yu Garden

Yu Garden was built in the sixteenth century. It was a major project in its time and featured a rock garden wall which, at the time, was the tallest structure in the city - about 40 feet! Most of the city is about four metres (twelve feet) above sea level. The rock for the wall was brought from the mountains, the nearest ones being over 200 kilometres away.

We walked around with hundreds of others, looking at the old buildings, the pools and the huge carp.



Local residents



The tallest structure in the city



A male lion

Unusually, there are ornamental dragons here, which were normally reserved for the Emperor, with serious consequences for anyone else who used them. The man who built the garden talked his way out of it.



An unusual dragon

There were also lions at the door. I had wondered earlier why the lions that I had seen didn't come in identical pairs. Bruce explained that they were male and female. The male had his head up and was roaring. The female looked down at the cub under her paw. I will have to examine those on The Bund as I pass them tomorrow.

We were not expecting to be taken up in a lift for an excellent view over the city and then a tea tasting ceremony. A lady brought us a whole range of teas; Jasmin; Jasmin flower (the sort where the flower opens up in the water); ginseng oolong; green and lychee black.



An unexpected tea tasting

We tasted them all and I struggled to remember which was which. They were all very delicate. My least favourite was the lychee black, which tasted of Turkish delight.

The last outing of the day was to The Bund, which I had already explored several times.



The blood bus

It was interesting to see a blood donation unit parked by the side of the shops. Increasingly, China seems to be catching up with the rest of the world in a number of socially responsible areas.



What a view from The Bund

We visited a jade and opal shop, which was beneath the raised promenade. There were lots of incredibly ornate sculptures at incredibly high prices. Not my scene. I left the others and walked the short distance back to my hotel for a rest.

At 17.30 I tried out the British Bar in the hotel basement. Most of the beer was Japanese so I wasn't too excited but it gave me the chance to write my diary.



The evening view along the creek

I decided to return to the restaurant at which I had had lunch yesterday as it seemed to be the nearest suitable option, about fifteen minutes away.



Yet more chillies

Like yesterday, my meal had lots of chillies. The smoked pork (almost bacon) with vegetables was spicy. The pak choi was bland. A good mixture.



They know how to light up a city

I walked back, via the amazing illuminated floral decorations, dodging both the traffic and the wedding parties. There were at least half a dozen on the bridge.



Wall to wall wedding parties

My usual evening chores followed.

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A floral start to the morning

My walk down The Bund took me past the flowers and also the lions. Close examination suggested that the lady lions had manes and didn't appear to have cubs. This is all very confusing and I will have to do more research.



The lions confuse me

I also found a rather fine juxtaposition between a fire hydrant and a very posh window display. Just the sort of thing that might do well in a competition.



Almost artistic

At the Westin I waited for things to happen and was accosted by Bruce who was to lead today's tour. Seven of us - all Americans except me - boarded a small mini bus for the drive to Suzhou. The journey of 110 km was expected to take a couple of hours because of the heavy traffic.



Chaos in all directions

The first 45 minutes varied between dead slow and stop. The lady sitting in front of me said that it reminded her of home - LA. We passed one magnificent temple, drove past the rear of the Museum and headed through miles and miles of suburbs.

Things eased briefly but then we resumed the stop/start mode of transport. After an hour we started to rattle along at speed. "Rattle" is the operative word as the road surfaces often left a lot to be desired.



Lots of elevated motorways

We left the city via a network of elevated roads and passed into more rural areas or areas awaiting redevelopment. After 80 minutes, we passed a sign saying Suzhou 53k and were on schedule for a 10.30 arrival.

The city is small, with a population of between five and ten million. The WWW seems to have mixed views about the actual population but it is probably similar to London's. A small city!



Suzhou, an old city

The CBD is actually on the outskirts as development in the centre is severely restricted so as not to interfere with the historic city centre, which is well over 1000 years old.



The Master of Nets Garden

Our main target was the Master of Nets Garden, set out in the mid twelfth century. Because it was before the Ming Dynasty, the door is guarded not by lions but by dogs surrounding a ball. Lions only appeared from Africa much later.



Supposedly dogs and a ball

The gardens were busy but much more peaceful than the ones we visited in Shanghai yesterday. I will have to rely on the photos to remind me of much that we saw.



The Master of Nets Garden



The Master of Nets Garden



It was immortalised in paint ...

We did learn of the pet tiger that lived there as a pet in the not too distant past. It died young as a result of lack of exercise etc, much to the anguish of its owner. He immortalised it in both paint and photograph.



The Master of Nets Garden



... and photograph



The Master of Nets Garden

We visited the Grand Canal, the oldest and longest canal in the world. It runs about 1100 miles from Beijing to Hangzhou, near Shanghai and is one of many waterways passing through Suzhou. There is an old style bridge across it, facing the old town walls and a pagoda built by an Emperor in honour of his Mother. He built lots of them across the country at huge expense, upsetting the tax payers and leading to his downfall.



Over the rickety bridge



The Grand Canal



Lunch

Lunch was in a large restaurant, consisted of about eight dishes and was very good. I think I preferred yesterday's lunch but that was down to my taste, not the quality of the food.



A fine pagoda



Suzhou silk factory

The silk factory was in the grounds of the wartime Japanese Embassy, a large red brick building, typical of the period.

Just like yesterday, we saw the cocoons being woven into thread and the larger ones being stretched for use in duvets. I bought a couple of fans which looked quite pretty.



Plastic silk worms



Zhoozhuang - a new tourist centre



The large ones are stretched for duvets



Ham hocks - the local delicacy

We returned to the bus and sat for a 45 minute drive over lots of water and through lots of fields. The yellow plant, similar to mustard, is used to enrich the soil for next year's rice crop.



Yellow plants



The Venice of China

Everywhere, there were buildings. I asked Bruce how far you would have to travel in order to find areas without buildings. He thought about 1000 kilometres, inevitable in a country of over 1.2 billion people.

Zhoozhuang is a tourist town. It is called the Venice of China but that should probably be the other way round as it was a busy waterside town when Venice was only a swamp.



A series of old bridges



Chen Yifei, furniture designer ...



We joined the large crowds ...



... film director, artist...



... examined the crafty shops ...

We wandered up waterside passages, crossed old bridges and examined old houses. It was all spectacularly pretty. Chen Yifei, the painter and film director, lived here and we did a tour of his house.



... the original

After a good wander, we climbed into two boats for a twenty minute voyage along the canals. Ours was propelled by a young lady who, for a small tip, sang us some local melodies. She had a nice voice and it was all rather soothing.

We looked at the tourist shops and the huge crowds, visited the very smart loos and returned to the bus.



A lady painted the inside of these glass balls



The locals managed the steps



We cruised the canals



Another posh basin



There was even an English link

The first hour of the 90 kilometre journey went quite rapidly and we covered lots of ground. The second hour and a half was very slow as we crawled through the rush hour traffic.

We reached the Westin at about 19.00, said our farewells and went our separate ways. I walked up the road towards Nanjing Road, the local equivalent of Oxford Street. It was heaving. I decided that it wasn't likely to offer the sort of restaurant that I wanted so I returned to the back streets.

I found an upstairs restaurant, where I had adequate beef with green peppers and good shrimp dumplings. Just to top up my food intake, I bought some peanuts in a corner shop and some oranges at a greengrocers. Back at the hotel, I ate some of each and did the usual evening chores.



I walked back ...



... through the city ...



... and the amazing lights

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There used to be a view

The best laid plans ... My plan was to catch the ferry across the Huangpu River to Pudong, take a lift up the Oriental Pearl Radio & TV Tower and look at the view. The weather forecast had suggested that it might be misty and one quick look out of my bedroom window indicated that it was very accurate.

I had breakfast, later than usual so it was quite crowded, conducted a major and, ultimately, successful search for my pedometer, and set off at about 08.20.



There is a barrier across the creek

The mist was just as thick at ground level as it had been at the 16th floor.

I had thought, a couple of nights ago, that there was a barrier across the mouth of the Suzhou Creel. There was one in full view today. I must check later to see if it has come down again.

At this stage, I decided that my best New Zealand merino sweater, that I had carried round in my bag for days, would be useful so I put it on. It is warm for something so light.



A scene by Whistler?

The inland side of The Bund is said to look like London and on this morning it resembled the foggy versions painted in the Victorian era by the impressionists like Whistler. It was atmospheric but the buildings lacked their usual grandeur.



I joined some other hopefuls

After a little over a kilometre, I found the ferry terminal, just missed one and joined some other hopefuls waiting twenty five minutes for the next one.

When the next boat arrived, I boarded and soon realised that the ferry company could learn something from the Star Ferry Company in Hong Kong. The lower deck was like the car deck of an Interislander.



Not the poshest of boats



Interesting birdie

Up top there were few signs of style and not too many passengers. At a cost of about 25p, however, you get what you pay for.



We arrived on the other side

Ten minutes later, we arrived at the other side of the river, over half a kilometre downstream from where we had started.

I walked back down river, spotting lots of towers, birds and some views which were incredibly like the Thames towards the City end of London. The TV Tower was still shrouded in mist.



And another



This could be London



So could this



The TV Tower was still shrouded in mist



Streets lined with flowers



The Convention Centre - not the prettiest!

Having come one way on the ferry, I wanted to return through the Tourist Tunnel, which emerges quite close to my hotel. On the opposite side of the river, it is very well signposted but, over here, it was a different story. I finally found the entrance hidden behind the Convention Centre. This isn't an attractive building but is now hosting a large conference on tourism in Shanghai.



An entrance like a fairground

I descended one escalator, found myself in what seemed like a cheap funfair, paid my 50 yuen (compared to 2 yuen on the ferry) and descended another escalator.



I entered a little pod ...

There, I found some little pods, similar to those on a cable car but running on rails.



... and passed through some clever lighting

I had one to myself - no other tourists in sight - and crossed beneath the river to the accompaniment of some special lighting effects. The photos may or may not work.



The tunnel emerged on The Bund

Two more escalators returned me to street level on The Bund, adjacent to Starbucks and Costa. I resisted the temptation!



Nanjing Road

Nanjing Road is the local equivalent of Oxford Street but pedestrianised for much of its length. I stared at the stores, which could have been anywhere in the world, and dodged the novelty trains. There was even a double decker bus to admire.



Another scene from London?



This could be anywhere

I stopped to look at my map and an old chap showed me where I was - I knew that already - and smiled at me. I found some coins and handed them over. I knew they would come in useful.



Street art and street photography

After walking about ten kilometres, I turned off the main street for a couple of blocks in search of the restaurant in which I hoped to have lunch. It was a worrying sign that, at 11.30, the one along the road already had a huge queue outside.

My next task was to find a book shop in Times Square. This meant entering Peoples' Square, home to the City Hall and the Museum as well as lots of open space.



People's Square



A good place to relax



Blocked off by the motorway

Along the bottom end is an elevated motorway - we drove along it yesterday - which proved to be an impenetrable barrier. I tried and failed to find a way through.

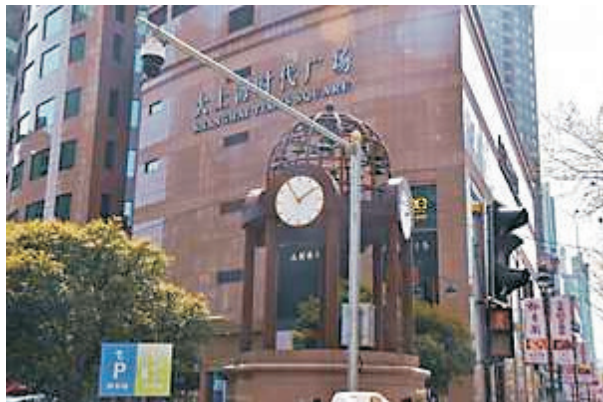


A long queue for lunch

Deciding that I should stop for lunch, I retraced my steps to the restaurant with its doors adorned with Michelin stickers. There were people sitting around in the foyer and a nice lady guarding the lift. I raised a finger - nicely - she shook her head and I left.



Not the bookshop I was seeking



Times Square - straight into the sun

An exploration of the area revealed lots of very busy restaurants so I gave up and decided to continue my hunt for Times Square.

I adopted the German approach and, rather than trying to cross the motorway (Maginot Line?) I went round the end of it. Times Square hove into view and resembled a smaller version of its Hong Kong namesake.



Japanese in China

There were some restaurants in the basement and, after looking at the menu pictures, found a seat in one of them. It was Japanese, which I wouldn't normally select but it was a stroke of good fortune. A tray arrived containing a fried pork escalope, some salad, some rice, some pickle and some water melon. Best of all, was a small pot of prawn and mushroom custard. Beautiful stuff and I would never have considered ordering it. For £5.50 it was a veritable feast. Not only was the food good, I was able to have a rest after five hours of walking. It was, incidentally, warming up outside and I had removed my sweater some time before.

The book shop I was seeking should have been in the basement of Times Square but that only seemed to contain the food court. I decided that enough was enough and that I would head back to Nanjin Road.



I needed a rest

The afternoon sun was bright, a return to the weather of the last three days. I had now walked about thirteen kilometres and was

feeling very tired. As I had just about decided to return next year, I didn't feel the need to rush around to see more and more. Had I been in Hong Kong or Singapore, I would have been settling into a cold beer somewhere.



Pretty but touristy

In the middle of Nanjing Road is a small open space with trees, seats and a European style café. This provided a properly cold Tsing Tao in a properly chilled glass. I enjoyed it.

I followed the back lanes towards the hotel and detoured up some new ones to see if I could locate any likely looking restaurants. I couldn't. The hotel is great except when it comes to eating. Having quite a lot of cash in hand, I decided to go to the Chinese restaurant in the hotel to see if it was any good. It's bound to be expensive.

I unpacked and repacked almost all of my belongings, leaving the last minute clothes and the contents of the safe for later. I then had a long rest on the sofa in front of the TV.



Lots of noodles with pak choi

After 18.00 I took the lift down, located the restaurant and discovered that it was very quiet. The noodles with pork turned out to be noodles with lots of pak choi and very little pork. Tasty, though.



Even more pak choi

The seasonal vegetable turned out to be pak choi and the fried shrimp was exactly that - one large fried shrimp in sauce.



An elegant tea

The green tea had lots of leaves floating and was topped up with boiling water from time to time. All in all, a healthy and satisfying meal even if it doesn't sound like it. I will be able to let myself go a bit in Hong Kong.

While I was organising my cabin bags, I was watching TV. I had been interested from the day that I arrived to see that I was able to watch BBC World, apparently as normal, and to use the WWW. Suddenly, the TV went blank. I turned it off and on again and the BBC reappeared with an earnest discussion on Confucius and Chinese plans for world domination. Suddenly the screen went blank again. It might have been a coincidence but