

Twenty-Six Hours in 'Hard Seat' Class – China 1989

Charles Davis

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We had never planned to come to Kunming, but here we were. Our intrepid little tour group had intended to cross the Himalayas from Kathmandu into Tibet, but political tensions had closed the border, so Plan B was to skip Tibet, fly to far southern China and start the trip from Kunming in Yunnan province.

Kunming in 1989 was a charming if unexciting little city. Being a vast distance from Beijing, it had once been a place of internal exile for errant Communist officials during the Cultural Revolution, although Mao had put an end to that when word got out that it was actually a lovely place to live – a mild climate, unpolluted. I recall low-rise buildings (there was plenty of construction underway, and I believe that it is changed profoundly now) and wide boulevards with generous sidewalks and many bicycles.



In the evenings couples would be seen on those sidewalks, dancing elegantly – Western ballroom style – to Chinese music from tinny loudspeakers.

Around Kunming, there were scenic treats. We did not see all of them, but one on the itinerary was the 'Stone Forest', weird limestone rock formations characteristic of South East Asia. We were surprised to see lots of tourists there – all Chinese, who in those days rarely travelled outside China. A precursor to the massive international Chinese tourism we see today.



[The Stone Forest, Kunming](#)

The onward trip would be by train, 1200 kilometres; 26 hours from Kunming, north to Chengdu in Sichuan province. Steve, our enthusiastic young tour leader, said that he had been unable to procure booked seats, and the only seats available were in Fourth Class, known in China as 'Hard Seat Class'. With good reason as we were to find. The fare for the entire 26-hour journey was six US dollars.

When we arrived at the station in the afternoon, the train was at the platform with doors locked. The size of the crowd on the platform did not bode well; it seemed too big to get everyone on board. When the doors were opened we became part of a mob. Now, the Chinese have little interest in western niceties like queueing up in orderly fashion, but we Westerners did have an advantage: we were bigger and stronger than just about any of them. We shouldered and bullied our way aboard while a few empty seats remained, but the people kept coming, standing room only.

The advantage of being seated was only relative. Hard Seat Class was an apt name; there was minimal padding and no concession to the human form, with the seat backs flat and vertical. Being sized for the Chinese made the seats even less comfortable. Somehow the train left on time, with people left on the platform. In the carriage, about half the passengers were smoking those cheap and rancid Chinese cigarettes; with hawking/spitting sounds became part of the continuous background noise.

I was sitting facing a couple, married I presumed, in Army uniform. With nothing much else to do, we stared at each other, across a little table and a massive cultural gulf. As the evening wore on, the train made a couple of stops and the crush of people seemed to dissipate slightly. I was able to check out the (hole-in-the-floor) toilets; their state was, well, unspeakable. I remember a fellow standing outside one of the toilets; he had large bucket of eels.

I did manage to get a photo during the long night. Sleep was elusive.



Hard Seat Class, people seated/lying on floor not visible

On the upside, the Kunming/Chengdu rail line is one of the great railway lines of the world. Built at great human cost by slave labour during the Cultural Revolution, almost the entire journey is in rugged terrain hostile to railways. Our guidebook said that there were 500 tunnels and 500 bridges, and as night turned to day I got the impression that this was so. Some beautiful scenes presented themselves, but only briefly, before the train would dive into another tunnel.



The day wore on; my back was wearing out. Nourishment came from snacks purchased through the window when we stopped at towns. I did have some relief. Steve had managed to obtain a small compartment elsewhere in the train. I spent a little time there, but there was not room for many of us. One of the women in our group had taken my Hard Seat place, and it seemed the gallant thing to do to go back there and let her have the comfy chair.

I have little memory of the final hours. There was one final excruciation. Chengdu had two stations, one in the south and the main station in the north. In between, the line looped slowly around the city, and our train took two long hours to do this final bit. When, after dark, we finally peeled ourselves out of our seats and staggered into taxis, we drove across the city again to find that our hotel was right outside the southern station.

I can't think of much to say about Chengdu. Millions of people and seemingly a bicycle for everyone. Hints of the economic changes to come on the billboards advertising cars (not so many actual cars on the streets). Spicier Sichuan food. Political unrest that led to the democracy protests was only weeks away, but we remained unaware. I did get a nice photo of a street art market.



Chengdu

The next leg of the trip was another 24 hours in the train to Lanzhou. Steve told us that once again we would have to slum it Hard Seat Class. NOT...AT...ALL...HAPPY...STEVE.

We rocked up to the platform well ahead of time, but the scene was even more alarming than Kunming, with large crowds gathering at the locked train doors. We took a punt and chose a door, but when the time came they opened every door but ours. Time for desperate measures. We noticed one of the windows in the middle of the carriage was open. We ran to it; the window was high but I gave Steve a leg-up and he clambered through. We threw some bags through and Steve hauled me and one or two other able-bodied travellers into the carriage.

We were just in time to claim some seats, but bedlam was building. I took an aisle seat and tried to hold the other seats for the others who were boarding rather more conventionally. It was futile; the crush was such that I was forced toward the window. Our fellow travellers were stuck in various parts of the carriage; one English fellow began to freak out. "I am not putting up with this! I am leaving the tour!" he shouted above the din, but he couldn't get to the door. Steve managed to force his way through the crush and avert the crisis.

But we were in a sticky situation. The train headed off with people crammed into every cranny. Pressed against the window, I decided to take a 'zen' attitude, just tuning out and accepting the situation (easier with a window seat, I suppose).

So there was almost a feeling of mild disappointment about two hours later when Steve fought his way back into the carriage and said he had obtained (probably by bribery) a first-class compartment. Just getting there was quite an exercise; it took me more than half an hour with my backpack to bully my way through the crush. The first-class carriage, normally reserved for government or party officials, was an oasis; our compartment did not actually have enough seats for our group, but it was

still preferable to the alternative, and we took turns sitting in comfortable seats and lying on the floor.

But it was Fourth Class on the Chinese trains that would remain unforgettable. I have done my share of roughing it in the years since then (and before), but no matter how hard it got, I could always tell myself that I had coped with worse. Hard Seat Class would become, almost literally, my 'bench' mark for uncomfortable travel.