Barcelona, a city with a lot on the menu. N4

Cool tools for the camp cook. N4

A fresher BEIJING

Take a cool break from the city's smoggy, humid frenzy: Visit a green park with a temple and trees and tea.

LARISSA and MICHAEL MILNE

A Year and A World
By Larissa and Michael Milne

BEIJING — It was a late-summer day, and the air was thick with the combination of humidity and smog particular to this capital city. Beijing is nestled in a bowl between the Xishan and Yanshan mountain ranges, creating a trap for the dense smog blowing in from the industrial zones to the southeast. We had just spent the morning trudging through the Forbidden City with virtually every other tourist in town. The palaces and presentation courts were grand and imposing and beautiful. But the throngs of people, coupled with that sticky air, made it difficult to appreciate the wonders before us.

Leaving the grounds at the north end of the Forbidden City did not bring much relief. Since this is the only exit, the area just outside the gate was jammed with a gauntlet of aggressive hawkers. Departing tourists were bombarded with offers of rickshaw rides,

See **BEIJING** on N3

Beijing's Bei Hai Park, just five minutes from tourist-thronged Forbidden City, is crowned by the White Dagoba, a Tibetan-style stupa or shrine, reached through a colorful Buddhist temple.

BRIAN O'CONNOR

A respite in Costa Rica's rainy season

In the land of ecotourism, you can find lodging and dining bargains from May to December.

By Brian Wright O'Connor
FOR THE INQUIRER

MANUEL ANTONIO, Costa Rica — The afternoon rains long gone, the beach crowd at Playa Espadilla sits back to watch the liquid golds and purples of the Pacific sunset spread across the sky. Surfers catch the last curls of the day breaking toward the crescent-shaped cove.

The snowbirds who flock to this resort along Costa Rica's central Pacific coast won't be here for months. There's plenty of room — and plenty of bargains — in local hotels,

See **COSTA RICA** on N5

The sun sets in splendor at Manuel Antonio, left. In Costa Rica's rainy season, the nearby national park is less crowded. At right, a pizote, a Latin American raccoon with a pointed snout, also known as a coati.

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Glazed Buddha tiles at the base of the White Dagoba in Shan Yin Pavilion; 455 of them were crafted to simulate wood carvings and placed there to protect the shrine.

LARISSA and MICHAEL MILNE

The White Dagoba provides one of the best vantage points to look out over low, sprawling Beijing and the tiled rooftops of the Forbidden City. It looks peaceful from above, hiding the tourist frenzy.

In Bei Hai Park, find a fresher bit of Beijing

BEIJING from N1

guidebooks to what they had just seen, and all sorts of trinkets. Chairman Mao's Little Red Book with a cheap plastic cover seemed to be the most popular item. It was the low point of the day — we were tired, thirsty, and cranky, and we needed to get out of there. Fortunately, respite was only a block away.

Just northwest of the Forbidden City lies Bei Hai Park, a five-minute walk in distance but worlds away in atmosphere. The park is a 170-acre enclave of nature in the midst of the bustling city streets. Built as a pleasure garden for the emperors during the Liao Dynasty more than 1,000 years ago, it was opened to the public in 1925. It is an oasis of lush landscaping, Buddhist shrines, and tea pavilions, all bordering a large man-made lake. On a small island in the center of the lake is a Buddhist temple that can be reached by crossing a white marble bridge. The park also offers a commodity rare in Beijing; an absence of crowds.

The park's combination of pretty scenery and interesting historic sites is perfect for a relaxing half-day. A small admission fee keeps it hawker-free, so we could meander without having our elbows grabbed repeatedly or trinkets shoved in our faces. We knew we were off the beaten track when we realized we were the only Westerners present. There are numerous paths around the lake for those seeking either a pleasant stroll or a more vigorous hike. Hundreds of trees and the breeze off the lake keep temperatures cool on otherwise oppressive days.

For a bit of old-time charm, we decided to rent a boat and view the scenery from the water. We had our choice of a pedal boat or a battery-powered one. The hike through the Forbidden City had been enough exercise for one hot day, so we chose the latter. After barely reaching a dizzying 3 m.p.h., we realized the boat's battery was probably taken from an old flashlight. Images of the SS Minnow flashed through our heads.

We declared a victory when we managed to overtake a pedal boat that had a few 10-year-old kids pushing it along. Nothing too powerful here — the pace of the entire park is relaxing. After an hour or so drifting and taking in the scenery, we felt recharged enough (unlike our battery) to stroll across the marble bridge to explore the temple.

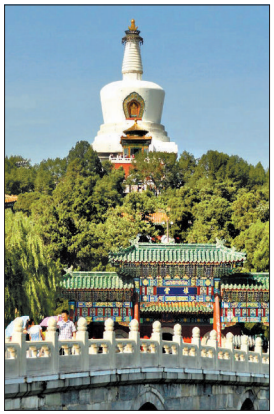
The Temple of Everlasting Peace is a relatively recent addition to the park, built in 1651. Near the entrance is a two-story bell tower. For a small fee, visitors can climb up and ring the bell that has hung in the belfry for more than three centuries. Legend claims that ringing it three times will ensure good luck for the coming year. Given our plans for traveling around the world, we had to do this. We swung a small log, suspended from the ceiling like a battering ram, to gently ring the bell. The sound that reverberated throughout the park was like a very deep wind chime — again in keeping with the serene theme of the gardens.

The complex consists of a collection of quiet courtyards, halls, and stone grottoes, the floors worn smooth by centuries of visiting devotees. It is still an active Buddhist temple, so it is important to be mindful that some are there to worship. Evidence of prayer is everywhere: Red wooden tiles asking for blessings hang by red silk cords from trees, urns, and statues. The path through the grounds gradually winds uphill, ending at a large white Tibetan-style stupa at the peak of the tiny island.

Known as the White Dagoba, the stupa was built on the hilltop site of the former Palace of the Moon. It was where Kublai Khan received Marco Polo during his travels to the East. The Dagoba was commissioned by a later ruler, Emperor Shunzhi, in the Tibetan style to demonstrate his belief in Buddhism, and his desire to unify various Chinese ethnic groups. At the base of the stupa stands the Shan Yin Pavilion, a tiny altar decorated with 455 glazed tile Buddhas — each was crafted in relief form to simulate wood carvings and were placed there to protect the shrine. The view from this pavilion is well worth the steep climb over uneven rocky steps. Handrails are an afterthought, so care is required when climbing.

The Dagoba provides one of the best vantage points to look out over low, sprawling Beijing. From here we gazed down on the yellow-tiled rooftops of the Forbidden City. It looked so peaceful from above, hiding the tourist frenzy we had recently escaped. In the opposite direction, the view takes in the expansive urban growth that spreads for miles until it is blocked by the mountains that border Beijing to the west and north.

After our climb to the peak, we were ready for some relief, so we stopped at one of the many tea gardens scattered around the lake for a cool drink and a snack. Sitting under a weeping willow and watching the boats drift by, with the tiled roofs of old Beijing poking up in the distance, restored our appreciation for the Chinese capital city. It reminded us that it is often the lesser-known sights that are most worth visiting.



The White Dagoba is reached by a stroll across a marble bridge. Lush landscaping and shrines make Bei Hai an oasis.

Prayer offering stand in the park. Red wooden tiles asking for blessings hang by red silk cords from trees, urns, and statues.

Bei Hai Park

It is just northwest of the exit to the Forbidden City, bordered by Wenjin Street to the south and Di'anmen W. Street to the north. There are entrances at both the southern and northern ends of the park. The easiest ways to get there are to take a taxi (which are plentiful and cheap in Beijing), or walk over after leaving the Forbidden City.

Hours: The park is open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. in spring, summer, and fall. Opening times are shorter during winter. The White Dagoba and Temple is open from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Boating is available from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. from late spring to early fall.

Admission: Tickets are 10 Chinese yuan or CNY (approx. $1.60) for admission to the park. A "Through Ticket," which grants admission to the park and temple, is 20 CNY (approx. $3.20). There is a small additional fee of 3 CNY to ring the bell. Boating costs 40 to 60 CNY ($6.25 to $9.50) per hour, depending on the type of boat rented.

Fares and weather make Europe in fall enticing

Tips on finding and using ATMs abroad, avoiding exorbitant cellphone costs, eating and drinking without depleting your funds, and getting around economically.

By Tom Parsons
DALLAS MORNING NEWS

Fall is a great time to travel to Europe, with pleasant weather and reduced crowds. It's also a good time because of the cheaper fares we're continuing to see for departures through Oct. 28.

I recently went to Prague and Amsterdam, and I have tips from that trip.

Bank ATMs are a convenient way to get your spending money while traveling abroad, but I advise travelers to carry two different bank cards. During this trip, I carried two, and was unable to get cash using one of them, even after five phone calls to try to remedy the situation.

In some countries, ATMs will give you a choice of taking a "conversion rate" or a regular rate. Always choose the regular rate. When I was in Prague, I had the choice to pay $184 for the conversion for 3,000 Czech crowns, but the regular rate was $173, so I chose the latter. That $11 difference can really add up when you go to the ATM multiple times for money.

You probably will pay fees for using an ATM, so you'll want to make larger withdrawals, instead of more frequent, smaller ones. Some bank affiliates don't charge a fee; check with your bank before you leave home.

It's also a good idea to access your bank's ATM finder online before you go so that you know the locations of ATMs near your hotel.

Hotel phone calls can be expensive. When I was in Amsterdam, it cost 3 euros per minute (about $5) to call the United States. Because I needed to conduct business while I was abroad, I kept my cellphone on, but didn't answer it. Instead, I texted my replies. For calls, I used my MagicJack computer phone system (www.magicjack.com) at the hotel, where I had free Wi-Fi, so I spent only $14 on incoming phone calls during my 12-day trip.

Before you leave home, check your cellphone coverage. You may want to make temporary changes to your phone or data plans to avoid being hit with a big bill when you return.

Wherever you travel, always avoid using a hotel room minibar. I go to local grocery stores and stock up on snacks so that I'm not tempted to pay $6 for a soda in my room. In Prague, we went to the cleanest and best-looking grocery store I've seen and bought ready-made sandwiches for lunch and snacks for later.

Another way to save on food is to avoid eating at restaurants in the tourist areas.

Public transportation is a bargain in Europe and much cheaper than taking taxis. When I was in Prague, I bought a 72-hour pass for $18 that provided unlimited rides on buses, trams, and the subway. One thing to be aware of is that the subways shut down at midnight.

In Amsterdam, it cost 7 euros ($10) just to get in a taxi, plus a metered rate based on distance. In Prague, the taxi rates weren't posted, so we were charged a variety of rates. If you must use a taxi in Prague, have your hotel call one for you because it will call a reputable company.

A favorite thing from my trip was a Segway tour in Prague. It was $90 for three hours, and it was well worth it. I was able to go up hills that I never would have attempted on foot and saw things I surely would have missed in the old and new areas of the city.

I fell off when I went left and my Segway went right, but I got up, dusted myself off and enjoyed the rest of the tour.

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