

# THE MALTESE IN CHINA

Joe Smith reports



Around this time a year ago I was uploading a couple of pictures on Facebook when a short message from our MIPP President, Kevin Casha popped up on my screen: "Hi Joe, are you busy in November?" I replied that as far as I knew it was still an easy month. Another message: "Want to go to China?" Now I was scrambling for my diary, hoping that October was a really easy month! It was, and next thing I was on the phone to Kevin.

Two years earlier, Kevin had successfully represented Malta at the Jinan Photo Biennial at the invitation of the Chinese Ministry of Culture through the China Cultural Centre in Malta. The Centre had contacted Kevin again and asked him to suggest someone who could participate in the 2010 Biennial. Kevin kindly enough put my name forward, and after submitting a few samples of my work, I was given the green light by the Chinese Cultural Centre in Malta.

The Jinan Photo Biennial is part of the Qilu International Photo week and it has become customary for the Chinese authorities to invite a photographer from each country where it is represented by a Cultural Centre. The centres include Paris, Cairo, Benin, Mauritius, South Korea, Mongolia and Malta. As I was to experience, this event is one of major proportions and given great importance by the Chinese Cultural authorities and by the press.

My flight itinerary saw me flying out to Cairo and then onwards on a nine-hour flight to Beijing. As I was queuing to board the aircraft in Cairo, I had a nice surprise as I spotted Ayman Lotfy, a highly respected Egyptian photographer who had been a guest speaker at the MIPP-SWPP seminar in Malta a couple of years before. He was also on the way to participate in the biennial. Needless to say, we stuck around together for most of the time and made some great pictures in the process.

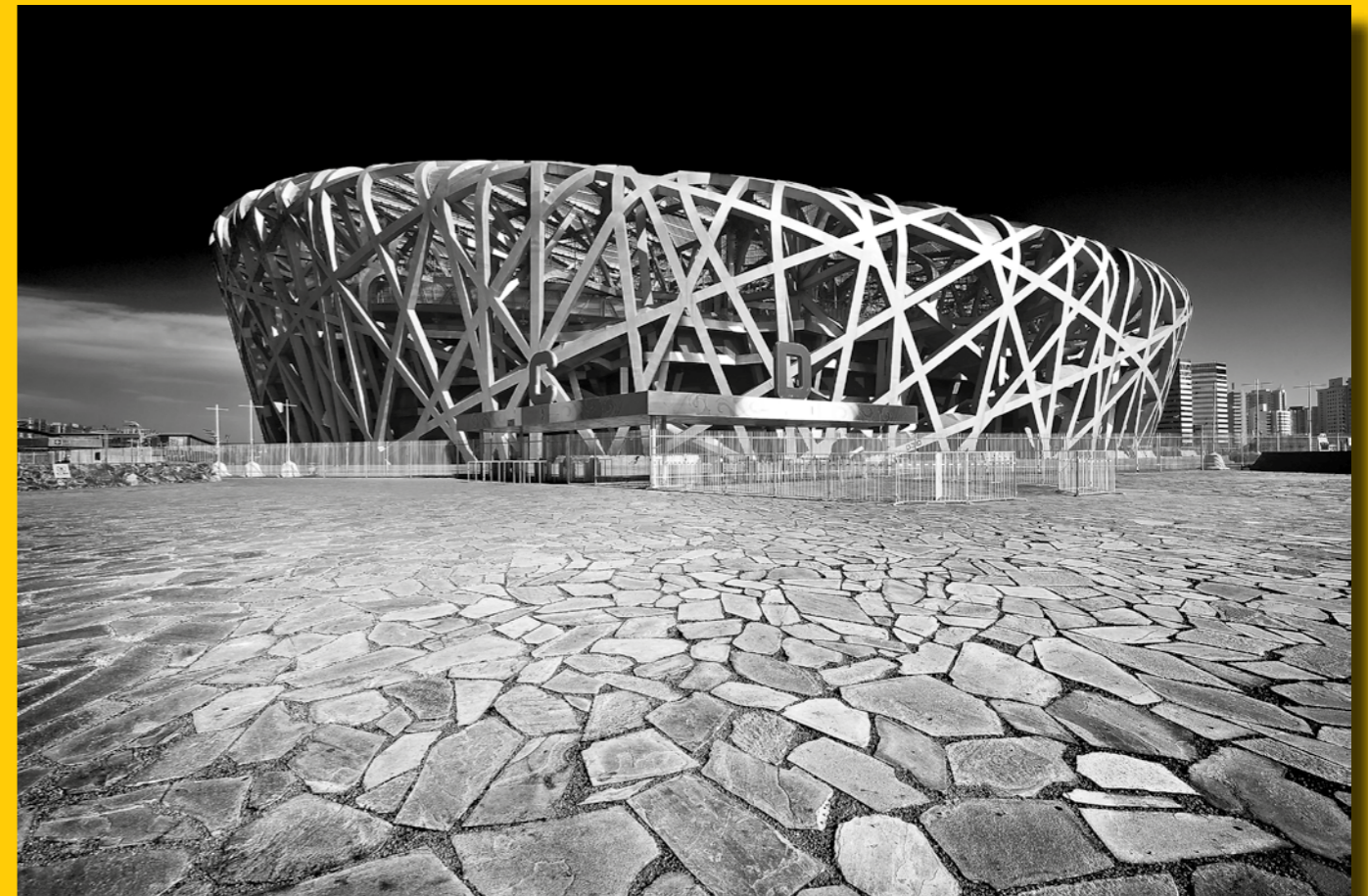
Our Chinese hosts had laid out an interesting programme for us. Three days in Beijing was followed by a five-day stay in Jinan. Hospitality was second to none and everything was planned to the last detail. After checking in at the hotel in Beijing, we met with the photographers from Benin, Mauritius and Mongolia and we all had dinner with our Chinese hosts.

I was swept off my feet by the diverse facets of this immense country. From the chaotic traffic circulation in Beijing, set against the towering skyscrapers of the Commercial District, to the narrow lanes, alleys and simple, aging houses of the peripheral back streets, China offers a colourful tapestry of peoples and cultures. Beijing has a population of 15 million with a further 5.4 million made up of migrant workers. For the photographer, it is a visual feast.

Whilst in Beijing we visited the majestic Temple of Heaven, a complex of buildings that was the place of prayer for the Emperors from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Architecturally it is a gem. Along the way, in the surrounding parks, the locals were practicing Tai Chi – dancing in unison to aerobic music or practicing the ancient art of Chinese calligraphy.



马尔他的乔 史密斯来自中国的报告。



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Using large brushes and water, elderly gentleman gracefully laid down the characters on the large flagstones of the path leading to the temples. The Chinese are by nature a friendly people and on most occasions pose willingly for a photograph. They are also very proud of their country and its rich heritage. I can perfectly understand why.

After a stop at a traditional Chinese Tea House, next on the itinerary was the palatial Forbidden City. This complex consists of 980 buildings and used to be the Chinese Imperial Palace from the Ming Dynasty until the end of the Qing Dynasty. It now houses the Palace Museum.

I really couldn't wait for the next item on the agenda. A visit to the Olympic Park, the famed Bird's Nest stadium and Water Cube. As a photographer with a penchant for architecture I was eager to see these two masterpieces up close and find some interesting angles. I have to say that it took me some time to raise up my camera to eye level. When faced with these two design masterpiece, I just stood rooted in awe, blown away by the perfect harmony of sheer design genius and engineering prowess.

The last day in Beijing was dedicated to a visit to the Great Wall and a trek up a steep flight of innumerable steps to one of the look out towers. Not an easy task when you have around nine kilos of photo equipment on your back!

But apart from the visual aspect of it all I was immensely impressed by the importance that China gives to all things cultural. Whether it's theatre, photography or art in general, one could see that the local authorities have culture at the top of their priorities list and invest heavily in it.

On arrival in Jinan we were all given a VIP pass and I have to say that we were treated as such. The Shungeng Hillview Hotel was top notch and the opening of the Biennial at the spacious Shungeng International Convention and Exhibition Centre was a huge thing. Mayors, presidents (including the president of the Professional Photographers of America), dignitaries and important people from the cultural scene were in attendance. It was also great to meet other international photographers of high standing and discuss this fantastic medium.

Press coverage of the event was the most comprehensive that I have witnessed to date. You could feel that there was genuine interest in the 3000+ exhibits were split between the Shungeng Convention and Exhibition Centre and the Shangdong University of Art and Design exhibits. We were bombarded with questions on everything photographic. Chinese photographers and photographic students from the Shandong University were queuing to have their photo taken with us! I can safely say that I have never before been photographed so many times in one occasion!

The venue also hosted a trade show and other activities during the week. One of these events was a well-attended fashion show featuring Chinese models and fashion designers. I was craning my neck trying to find a gap through the crowd to make some pictures when suddenly, a gentleman in some kind of uniform ordered the onlookers to make way for me to come forward and shoot! I know I had a VIP photographer tag hanging round my neck but I was definitely not expecting this. My Egyptian colleague Ayman, who had also been to the previous biennial, recounted how two years earlier they even had a police car travelling ahead of their coach to clear the traffic!

As I was flipping through the images that I had just made, I was approached by a Jinan TV cameraman and an accompanying girl carrying a microphone who in perfect English asked me if she could interview me as the cameraman focused on my Nikon's monitor whilst I went through the images. I gladly obliged.

As most of you might know, I am also very fond of photographing the performing arts, particularly dance and was therefore delighted when we visited the Shandong Theatre to watch a Chinese Opera Costume Show. The stage design, costumes and props were so detailed and exquisite.

Personally, one of the highlights of the stay in Jinan was a visit to a place called The Children's Palace. This is an educative institution that opens its doors only on weekends and public holidays with the specific aim of teaching arts and crafts to kids who want to make better use of their free time. We were take to a class of budding photographers and after watching a slide show of their work, we commented on it and answered their questions through an interpreter. These kids were totally immersed in the medium and I was captivated by their sheer attention and concentration.

A trip to the medieval town of Zhou Cun and another to the semi-deserted and crumbling rural village of Zhujiayu provided the majority of great photo opportunities. Zhou Cun is described as "the living ancient commercial complex museum in China". Medieval shops and tea-houses still line it's ancient streets. It is a protected site and has a high historic and tourism value.

Visiting Zhujiayu is like stepping back in time. This village is famous for the longevity of its residents, with many living well into their 90s. Part of the village is derelict, with remnants of crumbling abodes along narrow stone lanes and mud alleyways, whilst other parts still show well-preserved historic buildings dating back from the Ming and Qing dynasties. The rural community is also very friendly and some of them can be found selling souvenirs and vegetables along the cobbled lanes. A couple of dollars here and there and the shots were in the bag!

It was time to fly back to Beijing and spend the last day before flying back to Cairo. On the way to the airport we had time to stop by the National Centre for the Performing Arts of China, another architectural gem known as The Floating Pearl, with it's elegant dome shape gracefully emerging from a surrounding pond.

It was indeed a great honour to have been invited to participate in the Jinan Photo Biennial and also to be given the opportunity to catch a glimpse of this ancient and yet advanced civilisation that has become an economic powerhouse.

The hospitality shown towards the whole group of photographers was the best I have experienced and the networking was fantastic. Thanks Kevin Casha for suggesting yours truly, the China Cultural Centre in Malta for all their assistance and the Chinese Ministry of Culture for providing the opportunity. I would definitely love to go as there is so much more to discover.

An exhibition featuring 50 of my photographs was on show at the China Cultural Centre during May and June 2011.

