

Excerpts from "The Extras Pay off on a First Class Art Tour of China"

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"Yes, that Ross Terrill, the Harvard-based author of seven books on China who first ventured to the mainland in 1964. Yes, that little lodge, normally off limits to the hordes of tourists that roam the Forbidden City these days. And yes, a magnificent bowl, and two other imperial pieces, brought out for an up-close view and mini-lecture by a resident expert.

It was my first day in China, and the first, but hardly the last, time my group and I were made to feel special during our 16-day trip. As travelers with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we simply got used to it."

"For travelers - even independent and experienced ones who normally shun organized tours (like me) - these trips have many attractions. They would have to: although prices vary significantly, depending on the trip and the institution, they tend to be more expensive than other tours. My trip to China cost more than \$8000 (a person, double occupancy), plus airfare. I found nearly comparable trips on the Web at about \$5000.

But this is where Mr. Terrill and the other extras come in. Museums sell their entrée to private art collections, private sites, and private events - a chance to be on the A-list even when you're not. And they sell the presence of experts; besides Mr. Terrill, Diane Schafer, a lecturer in Chinese art at the Met, accompanied us.

My companions, a well-heeled group of about 40 people who ranged in age from 40 to 82, included doctors, lawyers, real estate investors, a "retired" Wall Streeter and a hospital administrator; they had very little interest in the shlocky sites and what we got of that was minimal."

"But China is so seductive that my trip would have been memorable even without singular moments. The facets that the Met arranged added to its allure. Consider one mark of its success: on a trip as high end as this, the traveler is king, and there was little pressure to attend every event on the agenda. But on my trip, most of us did, willingly.

