



## DAVE BARRY AT THE OLYMPICS

## WELCOME TO CHINA, FONDLE A PANDA

DAVE BARRY IN BEIJING  
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IN ANCIENT times, a Westerner had to journey for months, even years, to reach China. Today, thanks to modern air travel, it takes much longer. I estimate that the plane I was on flew around the entire earth three times before we got here. By the time we landed I had a near-fatal case of a medical condition that is known, technically, as “monkey butt”.

But now that I’ve showered, I’m excited to be here for these historic Olympic games, the first hosted by this proud and ancient culture, which has given the world so many important inventions, including gunpowder, paper, fireworks, Chinese checkers, gravel, celery, nitrogen, the pyramids, instant replay and The Twist.

But despite its storied past, China is not a museum: It is a modern economic superpower that manufactures basically every product that comes in those plastic packages that you can’t open without a machete. China is the world’s most populous nation, with a population of more than 1.3 billion, making it home to one out of every four people on earth.

Think about what that means. It means that if you belong to a family of four, one of you lives here. (To find out if it’s you, check your driver’s licence.)



Dave thought he’d made it to the synchronised swimming event. GETTY IMAGES

The Olympics are a HUGE deal for China. Everywhere you look in this teeming capital city, you see vague shapes in the distance that might be large impressive Olympic things if you could actually get a good look at them, which you can’t because the air is swarming with toxic particles the size of M&Ms.

The Chinese government has been trying to reduce air pollution by shutting down factories — thereby threatening the world’s strategic supply of *Guitar Hero* — and ordering Beijing residents to cease teeming during the Olympics. But air quality is still a big issue, as evidenced by the controversial decision by the International Olympic Committee

to allow marathon competitors to ride motorcycles.

Nevertheless, there will be no problems whatsoever during these Olympics, which will without question be the greatest games ever held. Why do I say this? I say it because the Chinese government authorities are closely monitoring us journalists and controlling our use of the Internet. They can cause trouble for us if we write something they don’t like, or mention a topic they want us to avoid, such as

ERROR ERROR ERROR YOU ARE  
 HAVING TECHNICAL INTERNET  
 PROBLEM ERROR ERROR ERROR

So, the Chinese government is a little scary. There are police and army officers stationed roughly every 5 metres throughout Beijing; I’m pretty sure there’s one in my hotel closet.

On the other hand, the regular civilian Chinese people I’ve met are wonderful hosts, unfailingly friendly and helpful. You need a lot of help here, since most of the writing is in Chinese, which is basically a giant secret code designed to prevent you from having any idea what the hell is going on.

For example, as I type these words, I’m drinking some kind of beverage, but I don’t really know what it is, because the only words on the label that I recognise are “100 per cent”. I suspect that the Chinese authorities are watching me on a hidden camera and going, “He’s DRINKING it!

Ha ha! Tomorrow we will give him transmission fluid.”

Likewise, when I get into a taxi, I show the driver a slip of paper with Chinese writing on it, helpfully written by a hotel staff. I *think* this writing says, “Please take me to (name of destination).” But it could just as easily say, “I wish to fondle a panda.”

Fortunately my hotel has English-language TV. Last night I saw a public-service commercial that ended with this appeal: “Please, do not eat shark-fin soup.” I pass this along in case you were considering it.

My hotel also has western-style bathrooms. This is a luxury in China, which, while it was busy inventing gunpowder, fireworks, *et cetera*, apparently did not have time to get around to plumbing. You have to carry your own toilet paper, because many public bathrooms here don’t have it. Ideally, you would also carry your own toilet, because many bathrooms don’t really have that, either. What they have is basically a miniature bathtub in the floor. That’s all I am going to say on this subject.

But I am getting nitpicky. Overall, the Chinese have done an amazing job of preparing for the Olympics, and they’ve gone out of their way to make their foreign visitors feel welcome. I look forward to attending the Games, and even more to getting to know this fascinating country. So, if you’ll excuse me for now, I’m going to take a taxi to go see the Great Wall. Or, fondle a panda. Whatever this piece of paper says. TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES