

Beyond the Terra Cotta Warriors

to the Xi'an Muslim Quarter

Story and photography by Alison Abbott



Xi'an is famous for noodles of all shapes and sizes





The Terra Cotta Warriors

I wasn't expecting the call to prayer from the Muslim Quarter to be one of the most memorable sounds from my recent trip to China with Viking River Cruises. The sound filled a neighborhood in the bustling city of Xi'an, one of China's ancient capitals.

This city is well known for its main attraction: the Terra Cotta Warriors, a bucket list destination often topping everyone's itinerary when visiting China.

Truth be told, it is indeed one of the most magical discoveries I have ever seen.

I worked my way through hundreds of soldiers, chariots, and tourists at the Terra Cotta Warrior Museum. The previous

day, I climbed a challenging section of The Great Wall of China. After such magnificent highlights, I craved some street life and wanted to mix with the locals in Xi'an.

When I asked a tour guide and hotel concierge about visiting the Muslim Quarter, I found mixed reviews. Safety seemed to be a concern. I brought my street smarts, stayed aware of my surroundings and was handsomely rewarded with an authentically local experience. This was where I discovered Xi'an beyond the Terra Cotta Warriors.

Xi'an was the capital of 13 different imperial dynasties and tells a unique story. As part of the caravan route to Central Asia

and the Middle East, the city was a melting pot, bringing together people of many different cultures. The particular area known as the Muslim Quarter was settled by merchants and descendants of Persians, Arabs and central Asians who fled Mongol invasions during the Ming Dynasty. Called the Hui by the locals, their population in China numbers about 10.5 million people. Currently, in the Muslim Quarter, residents are estimated around 20,000.

Although I knew I was visiting a Muslim area, the call to prayer caught me off guard. The rhythmic chanting echoed through the narrow side streets that afternoon. As I entered the Hanguang Gate I

had just finished a bowl of green tea ice cream from a chic shop that would have been at home in any city in the world. The sound from the muezzin filled the air as dusk settled in over the neighborhood. Xi'an surprised me with all it had

to offer beyond the infantrymen standing guard over Qin Shi Huang, China's first emperor.

Huiman, the main street, was lined with food vendors and restaurants. Vast piles of dried fruits and nuts, unique

mushrooms and unusual eggplants were abundant. Many of the vendors featured barbecued meats on skewers, a specialty of the market. Xi'an is famous for its handmade noodles and I found them alongside the freshest of

Indulging in snacks in the Muslim Quarter Xi'an, China





Packaged sweets and other snacks in the market

ingredients for toppings. Cold noodles in all shapes and sizes came with tangy sauce, bean sprouts, and chili oil. Sour, sweet, nutty and herbal flavors danced on the tip of my tongue. Soup dumplings were smoky in a vinegary broth infused with shrimp shells. Juice flowed from ripe pomegranates and bright, flame-colored persimmons were the main ingredient for translucent, sugary, soft pies. I appreciated the diversity of what was on offer even from

afar. This was a slice of dining adventure quickly disappearing in other parts of the country.

Venturing off on the side streets, I found a wide variety of products. Each alleyway appeared to have a specialty. To the right, one featured crafts and artisan souvenirs. I stumbled upon a wonderful gallery of the peasant art I fell in love with years earlier in Canton. A left turn displayed birds and flowers, but I was not prepared for the larvae and

grasshoppers vendors sold as food for their feathered pets.

Along the way, I had a celebrity experience. Although international visitors are common at all the major tourist attractions, without fail, at least once a day, I heard the familiar ‘ni-hao’. Someone wanted to take his or her photo with this blonde Westerner. A young Barbara Walters requested an “on the street” interview about my experience in the Muslim Quarter. Smiling



strangers wanted to practice their English, certainly the mixing with locals I was seeking. Suddenly the experience morphed and a crowd was taking photos of us taking photos. The surreal encounter created a domino effect and a temporary paparazzi moment, which quickly ebbed and flowed on repeat throughout the week.

While I initially thought this area might be overrun with tourists, I found it more of a street food delight for locals. Vendors

operated throughout the day and closed briefly during the call to prayer. The market really came alive at night. I arrived at dusk and as the evening progressed, a sea of people made it difficult at times to move against the tide. Families strolled through and stopped intermittently for snacks of crisp chips made from apples. Crabs roasted on a stick and flavored with a Cajun-like spice were delicious. While much of the offerings were meat oriented, this

pescatarian found tofu, noodles, and seafood that more than sated my appetite.

As I took it all in and allowed my senses to be assaulted in the very best of ways, my expectations were once again challenged. There on the street was a muscular, pumped up lad who played to the crowd. He slowly danced his way back and forth with the rhythmic pulling of huge strands off a sticky mass, aerating the candy with each fluffy stretch. I closed my eyes,

Pomegranates ready for juicing
in the market. Xian, China

and just for a moment, standing in Xi'an's Muslim Quarter, a Jersey Shore girl transported herself to a boardwalk, felt a warm sea breeze and enjoyed a mouthful of salt water taffy—Chinese style.

if you go

[Viking Cruises](#) offers three river cruises in China ranging from 14-19 days. I was a guest on the Imperial Jewels of China.

Alison Abbott

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MA., with a focus on sustainable shades of green luxury. She is a passionate design

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Her writing has appeared in a regular column on The Examiner. Recent partnerships include Westin™, Stonyfield, Trip Advisor B2B and Chase Bank. Coverage of The Flower Markets of Mumbai was featured in Leaf Magazine. She has worked with tourism boards and reviewed hotels and restaurants around the world.



