

“Rocky Mountain Dancers” Tours China

by Cristina Seaborn, fiddler from St. Cloud

The Rocky Mountain Dancers, a troupe of 38 American dancers and musicians from California, Utah, South Dakota and Minnesota, traveled and performed in China this past October. Becky Coulter, a founding leader of the group, recommended me to play fiddle for this tour to China, my first tour with the group. The band was made up of two fiddles, guitar, mandolin, washboard and upright string bass.

The Rocky Mountain Dancers had performed in China in 1991, and had been asked by the China Federation of Art and Literary Circles to return to perform in China's 5th International Folk Festival. The Rocky Mountain Dancers is affiliated with the International Organization of Folk Art and has performed 25 tours together, mostly in Europe.

We were in China for sixteen days, from October 10th to the 26th. We arrived in Beijing, traveled to Xian and Hangzhou, and then flew home from Shanghai. The group performed traditional American dance including clogging, square dancing and the Virginia reel. We also performed a sweet mother and daughter waltz, as six girls ages 8 to 13 were included in the dance troupe. The music included traditional fiddle tunes such as *Old Joe Clark*, *Devil's Dream*, *Under the Double Eagle*, and *Arkansas Traveler*. I added a new tune that I love by Jay Ungar, *The Lover's Waltz*.

The festival included folk groups from ten countries, including Italy, South Africa, Egypt, Bulgaria (their act was a real knock-down fight on stilts), Moldavia (impressive dancers who combined ballet with folk dance), the Russian Army Drum Corps,

Cook Islands (the women wore strung-together coconut halves for bra), Netherlands (my favorite jamming musicians who knew Russian and Jewish folk music), Germany (polka band), Korea, and China. Each of the groups performed eighteen shows. The Chinese said that 250,000 people saw the performances live.

Each performance ended with fireworks and/or confetti. One of the fireworks shows was over West Lake in Hangzhou, with three fireworks shows going off simultaneously. I remember thinking, “Wow, I've never been so close to fireworks this huge before,” then feeling grit falling into my face. One of the Bulgarians had to have an eye patch for three days to recover from fireworks debris.

Because of September 11th, we were given a police escort behind and in front of our coach, and a bodyguard on board, at the expense of the China Federation of Art and Literary Circles. We were herded and encouraged to stay in a group. That is nearly impossible for Americans. At one point, in the Silk Market, some members of the group rebelled and insisted on shopping and taking their own cab ride to the nearby hotel.

Our translator said that he had read in books how independent Americans were, but he wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't been around us for sixteen days. Many times, he would ask our tour leader George if he really wanted him to say that. George said, “You're not saying it, I'm saying it. You're only translating what I say.”

We were given fantastic hotels, some which used to be palaces (The Utopia of

Eastern Jin Dynasty Hotel in Xian), and saw a China that is modernizing very quickly. In China, old and new are right next to each other.

We had one day in Beijing to see the Great Wall and to go to the Peking Duck restaurant, the best restaurant in Beijing. I have a photo of a photo of Richard Nixon eating there. The menu had all parts of the duck, and we were really better off not knowing what we were eating. Duck tongues are really amazingly tasty!

I loved the food and only had tummy grumblings a couple of times, which ammodium fixed right away. I noticed that the Chinese really don't have sugar or dairy in their diet. Maybe they don't pasteurize the milk, but what we got was always hot. Orange juice was made of hot water and Tang, I think!

The group usually tours in Europe every 2 or 3 years. Musicians and dancers who are interested can contact the International Organization of Folk Art or George Frandsen, 1985 Whitewater Club Way Palm Springs, CA 92262, 760-327-2623.

Cristina Seaborn has a Masters in Orchestral Conducting from St. Cloud State University. She is interested in jazz string ensembles, gives workshops on improvisation, and writes for string orchestra. Contact her for arrangements in fiddle, Celtic, Cajun and jazz styles. She is currently orchestra director at Technical High School and Oak Hill Elementary School in the St. Cloud School District. †