

## Memorable trip? Tell us all about it

We will be using this space each week to bring you stories and photos submitted by our readers who are eager to

share the highlights of a recent vacation. If you've taken a trip that you think others would like to hear about, contact us, and

we'll get it scheduled. We would like the stories to be about 500 words and ask that they contain helpful facts, such as

information about prices and recommendations for eateries, accommodations and not-to-be-missed sights or events. To

submit, email [travel@news-gazette.com](mailto:travel@news-gazette.com) and put travel story in the subject line.

### CHINA

# Journey to Haizhu: Building a Sister City bond

By DENNIS ROBERTS  
For The News-Gazette

Between July 17-31, six "citizen diplomats" traveled to southern China to visit Urbana's newest Sister City: Haizhu District of Guangzhou City, The People's Republic of China.

This was everyone's first visit to the city of Guangzhou — and my first flight across the Pacific Ocean to Asia. Urbana Mayor Laurel Prussing, Ward 7 city council member Diane Marlin, John Marlin of the Illinois Sustainable Technology Center in the Prairie Research Institute, Christopher Stohr of the University of Illinois Department of Geology and the project grant manager for the Sino-African Initiative, Marya Ryan, the chairwoman of the Urbana Sustainability Committee and I flew nonstop from Chicago to Hong Kong via Canada and Russia, going north toward the pole.

We checked into the City View Hotel in Kowloon. That night, we experienced our first meal in China, selecting our main course from a fish tank in the restaurant.

We spent one full day in Hong Kong, visiting Victoria Peak, the highest viewpoint in Hong Kong. Catching the last evening train to Guangzhou (old Canton), we passed through customs and entered Communist China.

On our arrival, we were greeted by Mrs. Chen Jieyu, director of foreign affairs for Haizhu District, and members of her staff. We arrived at our hotel in a heavy downpour. It was typhoon season, and I hadn't packed any rain gear.

Next, we saw the sights of Guangzhou. We went immediately to Canton Tower, at 600 meters, the third-tallest structure in the world, rising dramatically at the edge of the Pearl River. Naturally, we went right to the top and enjoyed a bubble car ride along the edge of the viewing deck. From this vista, we looked out over our new Sister City.

Since Guangzhou's total population is 12.7 million and Urbana's is 41,250, we went to form bonds of friendship specifically with Haizhu District. With a population of 1.2 million and home of Sun Yat-sen University, it is a better match.

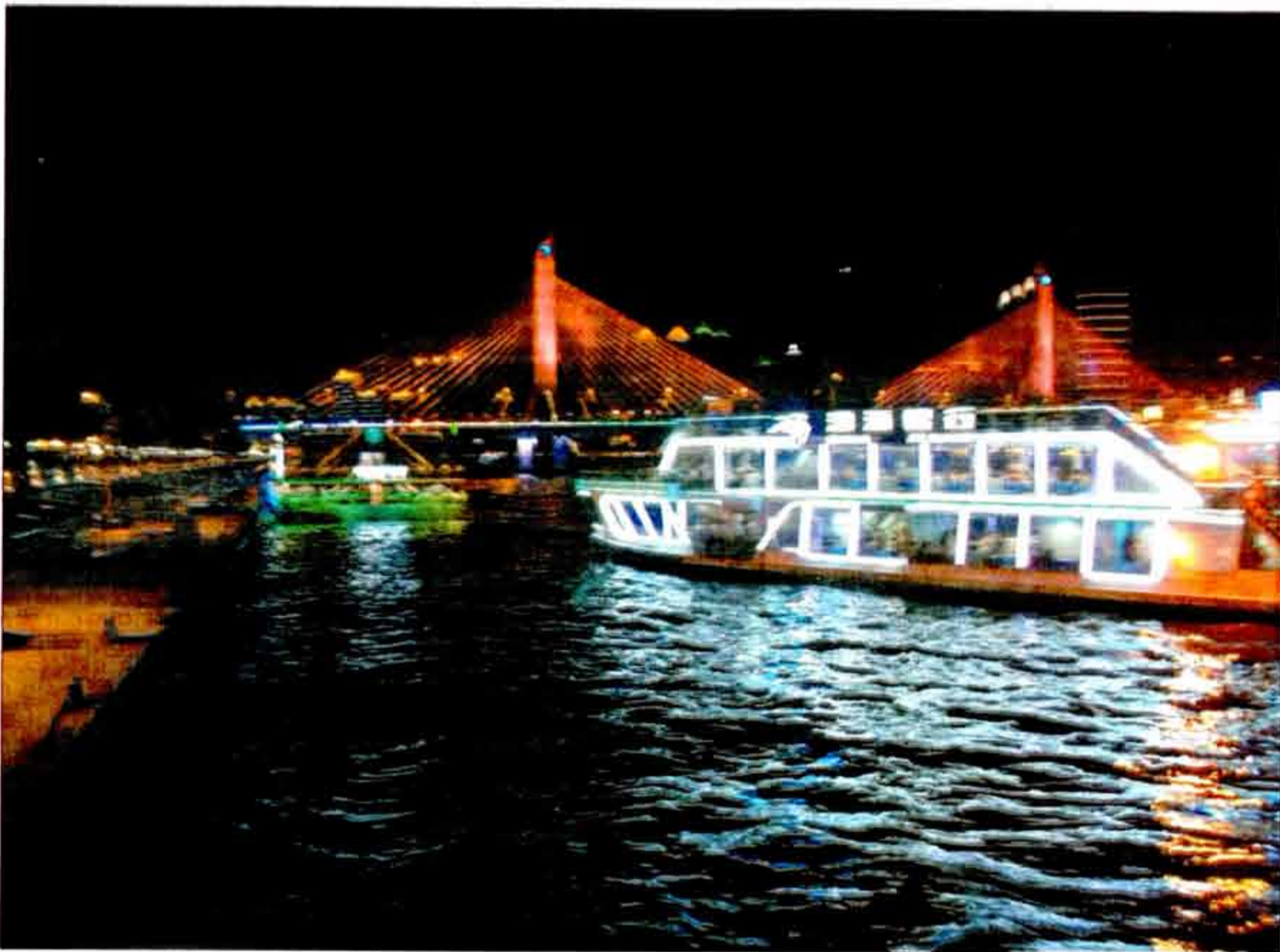
We made a memorable visit to the "Swamp Park," a botanical wetland garden. Here we discovered a tree dedicated to Urbana! In 2012, Urbana was invited by Guangzhou to enter an international competition for municipal innovation. While Urbana's entry on urban forest diversity did not win, a tree was planted in our honor: Tree No. 111, *Chorisia speciosa* (silk floss tree).

On July 20, we met Kathy He, a member of the Guangzhou Municipal Public Security Bureau. We had met her in Urbana six months earlier when she visited the University of Illinois Police Training Academy.

Kathy was an incredible hostess. We visited the Chen Clan Temple and Folk Arts Museum, Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall and the Five Rams Statue in Yuexiu Park, the emblem of Guangzhou City. This statue celebrates the legendary arrival of the Five Immortals, riding on five rams, bearing rice stalks in their mouths, which saved the populace from starvation more than 2,000 years ago.

That evening, we were treated to a cruise on the Pearl River. The buildings and bridges spanning the Pearl River, and even Canton Tower, were all illuminated, while the tour boats plying the river were decked with lanterns and colored lights, creating a brilliant panorama.

Our delegation began its real work July 21, with a meeting with Haizhu's foreign affairs officers and Jian-jian Yao, secretary general of the Guangzhou's Peoples Association for Friendship and Foreign Countries, a high-ranking Communist Party representative. The formal seating and a gigantic red banner underlined the



Dennis Roberts photos

**ABOVE:** Cruises on the Pearl River offer a tremendous light show. **BELOW LEFT:** The Urbana contingent visited Sun Yat-sen University. **BELOW RIGHT:** Canton Tower visitors can take a bubble car ride along the edge of the viewing deck. The building in Guangzhou is 600 meters tall.



importance of our first diplomatic exchange. Greetings were shared, introductions made and we watched a short video about Guangzhou City. Our own presentations highlighted Urbana's goals for environmental responsibility and sustainable practices and ended with an invitation to participate in Urbana's Sister Cities programs.

We then presented Yao with gifts including books on Illinois, items from the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, music CDs and a booklet printed in Chinese on the history of Urbana's Sister Cities Program. We concluded with an invitation to Haizhu to participate in the Sino-African Initiative, the \$100,000 trilateral grant awarded to Urbana by Sister Cities International in 2012. Several group photos were taken.

At the formal banquet that followed, we were pleased to learn that participation in informal exchange

trips between our communities would be approved.

Our last day in Haizhu brought us to Sun Yat-sen University, where we reconnected with Professor Kairong Lin in the Department of Geology. Friendly interactions and gift giving brought the approval for Kairong to travel to Africa to assist in our SAI grant project to build new solid waste collection and composting facilities in Zomba.

In November, a delegation from Zomba also will visit China, while Urbana will send representatives to attend both meetings.

This ended Urbana's first Sister Cities visit to Haizhu District. Our group went on to visit Shanghai, Xian and Beijing before returning home.

**Dennis Roberts is the Ward 5 alderman on the Urbana City Council and chairman of the Urbana Sister Cities Committee.**



**LEFT:** Urbana delegation meets with leaders of Haizhu District, and make their presentation Urbana's Sister City Program and express interest in future efforts of cooperation.

**RIGHT:** Mayor Laurel Prussing and other members of Urbana's delegation stand next to tree #111, which is dedicated to Urbana at the wetland park botanical garden in Guangzhou City, China.



