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NAZIBA BASHER, *back from China*

It was a soggy morning when we arrived in the city of Chengdu. After travelling all the way from Yunnan province, our 10-member journalist delegation was inevitably exhausted. But as soon as we boarded the bus, local tour guide, Dora, wasted no time lifting our spirits by sharing what we were about to experience in what is known as “China’s happiest city.”

Nestled in the heart of Sichuan province, Chengdu is a city where ancient traditions blend seamlessly with modern innovation, all under the watchful eyes of its most famous residents – the giant pandas. The people of Chengdu, many of whom are from Muslim tribes, are more than just friendly, with every Salaam responded to with a “Walaikum”, and every smile returned with an even bigger one.

Known for its laid-back lifestyle and fiery Sichuan cuisine, Chengdu is a sensory delight, with the air thick with the numbing aroma of mǎlà (Sichuan peppercorn and chilli) wafting from bustling street stalls. Teahouses dot the cityscape, where locals spend hours sipping jasmine tea, playing mahjong, and debating everything from poetry to politics.

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Whether you come for the pandas, the hotpot, or the history, Chengdu has a way of pulling you in – one spicy bite, one tea-scented afternoon, and one misty sunrise at a time.

ALL THINGS PANDA

Tucked away in the lush outskirts of the city, the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding is a sanctuary dedicated to the conservation of China's most beloved national treasure.

Established in 1987, the centre plays a crucial role in panda research,



Red Panda

DUJIANYAN IRRIGATION SYSTEM

The Dujiangyan Irrigation System is a marvel of ancient Chinese engineering that has stood the test of time for over 2,000 years.

Built in 256 BCE during the Qin Dynasty by governor Li Bing and his son, this ingenious system was designed to control flooding from the Min River while providing a sustainable irrigation network. Unlike traditional dams, Dujiangyan redirects and distributes water using a combination of levees, channels, and a unique fish-mouth-shaped embankment, allowing floodwaters to be managed without disrupting the river's natural flow. Today, it continues to supply water to vast stretches of farmland, reinforcing its status as one of the world's oldest functioning irrigation systems.

Beyond its function, Dujiangyan is a symbol of Chinese innovation and environmental harmony. Unlike modern dams that can obstruct ecosystems, this system works with nature, preventing soil erosion and

passed down only within families or to chosen apprentices. Accompanied by traditional Sichuanese instruments such as the erhu and gong, these performances bring to life folklore, historical tales, and legendary characters, often infused with humour and satire.

Beyond its theatrical spectacle, Sichuan Opera is a cultural treasure that reflects the region's unique spirit and artistic ingenuity. Unlike the more formal Peking Opera, Sichuan Opera embraces a livelier and more improvisational style, incorporating acrobatics and even hand shadows to engage the audience.

The opera's adaptability has helped it survive through generations, blending tradition with modern storytelling elements to remain relevant today, with history and magic seamlessly intertwining on stage.

THATCHED COTTAGE OF DU FU

The Thatched Cottage of Du Fu, located in the scenic outskirts of Chengdu, is a

melancholic beauty found in his verses. The place is not only an important cultural landmark but also a peaceful escape that allows one to understand the profound impact of Du Fu's poetry on Chinese heritage. It remains a symbol of the intersection between literary history and the beauty of the Sichuan landscape.

THE SICHUAN HOTPOT

The famous Sichuan hotpot, an iconic dish from the vibrant province, is a bold celebration of spices, flavours, and conviviality. At the heart of the experience lies a bubbling pot of broth, often divided into two sections – one brimming with a fiery mǎlà (a numbing and spicy combination of Sichuan peppercorns and chilli peppers), and the other offering a milder, savoury base.

The unique heat of the broth is balanced by its intense fragrance, which fills the air and entices all who gather around the table. Diners dip an array of ingredients, including thinly



Chengdu cityscape



Dujiangyan Irrigation System



Sichuan Opera



Thatched Cottage of Du Fu

breeding, and rehabilitation, ensuring the survival of this once-endangered species.

With sprawling bamboo forests, carefully designed enclosures, and state-of-the-art veterinary care, the facility mimics the pandas' natural habitat while providing a safe space for breeding efforts. Visitors can witness adorable cubs tumbling over one another in the nursery, adult pandas lazily munching on bamboo, and conservationists working tirelessly to protect these gentle giants.

Beyond its panda conservation efforts, the centre is a hub for wildlife education and ecological research. It collaborates with global organisations to enhance genetic diversity and reintroduce pandas into the wild, tackling the challenges of habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict. The base also houses red pandas, another endangered species, adding to its conservation efforts.

With interactive exhibits, educational programmes, and serene walking paths, the Chengdu Panda Base is more than just a tourist attraction – it's a vital stronghold in the fight to preserve one of the world's most cherished species.

Sichuan's model proves that with the right resources, education, and policies, species recovery is possible and has far-reaching positive effects on ecosystems and communities around the world.

maintaining ecological balance.

Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it draws visitors from around the world who come to marvel at its enduring ingenuity. The surrounding area, with its scenic temples, ancient pagodas, and breathtaking Mount Qingcheng, adds to the site's cultural and historical significance, making Dujiangyan not just an engineering wonder, but a testament to China's deep-rooted wisdom in sustainable water management.

SICHUAN OPERA

Much like our own “Jatraa Pala,” Sichuan Opera, one of China's oldest and most vibrant theatrical traditions, is a mesmerising blend of music, acrobatics, comedy, and illusion that has captivated audiences for centuries.

Originating in the Sichuan province during the Qing Dynasty, this art form is known for its distinctive musical style, playful storytelling, and the famous “face-changing” (bian lian) technique.

Performers, dressed in elaborate, colourful costumes, switch between vividly painted masks in the blink of an eye – a skill so secretive that it is

revered site that honours the legacy of Du Fu, one of China's greatest poets from the Tang Dynasty.

The cottage is a modest yet poetic retreat, originally built in the eighth century and situated amidst tranquil greenery and bamboo groves, where Du Fu lived during a turbulent period of his life.

Surrounded by gardens and ancient trees, the cottage served as a refuge for the poet as he sought solace from political unrest and personal hardship. Today, it stands as a testament to Du Fu's enduring influence on Chinese literature, drawing visitors who come to reflect on his timeless poetry, which captures themes of nature, hardship, and the human condition.

The site, now a museum, has been preserved and expanded with various pavilions, stone tablets, and exhibitions dedicated to Du Fu's life and works. Du Fu's Thatched Cottage remains an embodiment of the poet's deep connection with nature, as the surroundings inspired many of his most famous poems.

Visitors can stroll along paths where Du Fu once walked, passing through serene landscapes that evoke the



sliced meats, tofu, vegetables, and mushrooms, into the simmering liquid to cook, allowing each piece to absorb the rich flavours of the broth. This communal dining style encourages conversation and interaction, making the experience as much about sharing and connection as it is about food.

What sets Sichuan hotpot apart is its complex layering of tastes and boldness of seasoning. The combination of fermented bean paste, garlic, ginger, and spices infuses the broth with a depth that's both mouth-numbing and tongue-tingling.

It's a feast for the senses that has become a cultural staple, not just in Sichuan but across China and beyond.

In Chengdu, the hotpot experience is often complemented by the lively atmosphere of bustling restaurants, where diners share not only the heat of the meal but the excitement of the occasion. Sichuan hotpot is more than just a dish – it's an expression of the region's love for flavour intensity and communal enjoyment, making it an essential part of any food lover's journey through the province.

With all these combined, Chengdu stands as a testament to the harmonious blend of history, culture, and innovation that defines Sichuan province. As the city continues to grow, it remains deeply rooted in its traditions, offering visitors a truly unforgettable journey into the heart of China's past, present, and future.