

Ningbo serves up 'Ashoka' for Buddhists

Not too many temples house the skull of the founder of Buddhism, **Matt Hodges** reports.

The Buddhist monk, swathed in black robes and with something of a ghostly pallor about him, looked like a distant relative of the dark emperor in *Star Wars*, and I was testing his patience.

"Get down lower and look again," he said, as I dropped to my knees in a futile attempt to see the ancient relic obscured inside a tiny ornamental housing at Ningbo's Ashoka Temple.

According to the sign outside, the fragment of cranial bone I was looking for once belonged to "the founder of the Buddhist faith", in other words, Siddhartha Gautama (Sakyamuni).

"Are you sure it's in there?" I asked the tour guide, my cynicism resounding off the temple walls and further ruffling the robes of the monk.

"I see something glittering!" I shout. "It looks like a seashell."

And so it was with the weight of the dark side of the Force, or at least much bad karma, bearing down on me that I began my tour of Ningbo's Dongqian Lake.

This huge tract of water in Zhejiang province has a 45-km circumference surrounded by Buddhist temples, steppes of un-harvested green tea and a sculpture park featuring Stone Warriors from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).

The warriors are not as intimidating, or old, as their crumbling brothers in the great catacombs of Xi'an, Shaanxi province, but they are still worth a look. Meanwhile, the tea steppes are best viewed from the Mt Fuquan scenic spot, with Dragon Tongue of the East Sea being one of the more memorable brands.

The local tourism agency is pushing to get visitors -- most of whom are in and out before nightfall -- to stay a few days by promoting the area as an ecological haven and water sports center, where you can, among other things, try your hand at windsurfing. Mid-October would be a good time to visit as it sees dragon boat races.

The lake lies about 16 km from downtown Ningbo, a wealthy and slow-paced city that serves as the headquarters for many foreign companies and ex-pat English teachers, including one American guy from Hawaii (go figure).

It even has its own Bund, so to speak,



PHOTO BY MATT HODGES

Tourists pose with a bronze statue showing typically inscrutable Chinese playing their favorite game, mahjong, at the Tianyi Pavilion.

sans the old colonial buildings and majestic views. What this means in real terms is a small but accessible river, and a smattering of foreigner-friendly bars crammed into neighboring side streets (known as *laowaitan*). Of these, Le Cargo would be a good place to start.

Ningbo is also the source of 25 percent of Shanghai's original immigrant population, and the ancestral home of former KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek, Hong Kong actor Stephen Chow, and Sammo Hung.

It is also a refreshing place to spend a weekend, soak up a bit of culture, highlighted by Asia's oldest library, and hit the mountains or the beach. If you can speak Shanghai dialect, you may even be able to understand what the locals are going on about.

Sightseeing options are numerous and include Nanxi Hot Springs, the third-largest hot springs in China, in Ningbo's Ninghai County.

However it is the 400-year-old Tianyi Pavilion Library, or "The First Hall Under Heaven", as the black-robed monk and his

peers refer to it, which serves as the crown jewel for the local tour guide industry.

This labyrinthine museum of ancient Confucian scrolls and Ming Dynasty woodblock prints has shrunk over the years from around 70,000 rare texts to as few as 13,000 at the time of the founding of modern China.

Some of the missing texts, first amassed by high official Fan Qin, and subsequently treasured by his scions, have since been restored. It now claims to house a total of 300,000 volumes.

Spending an hour here is really an education in the need for strict discipline if you ever want to actually achieve anything in life. Fan kept such a tight ship that if any of his family, or their offspring, entered the library without permission, they would be excluded from worshipping their ancestors for one year. While today's kids would probably jump for joy at such news, things were a bit different back then.

What is even more interesting about the pavilion, apart from its water gardens and rocks shaped like Chinese characters, is the

inclusion of a hall dedicated to mahjong boards from around the world.

Mahjong is a Chinese board game that uses tiles of various characters and images to try and confuse the life out of your opponent, as much as I understand it. What piqued my curiosity, however, was how one such board got here from my hometown of London, dated circa 1900. Or rather, how it got to London in the first place. Most of my friends back home can't even use chopsticks.

Ningbo is a reduction of the Chinese Mandarin for "tranquil waves" (*ningjing bolang*), but, given the area's traditional love of three foul-smelling foods, including "stinky tofu" (*chou doufu*), "Stinkbo" comes to mind as an affectionate nickname. Locals tell me the traditional is dying out. That's a shame.

Ningbo's beaches lie about an hour's drive from the downtown. They serve as launch pads to the weekend-getaway islands of Zhoushan and Zhujiajian, the second of which comes recommended by the proprietors of HelloNingbo.com. Sadly, our itinerary didn't include provisions to get that far. But there's always next summer.