

EAST COAST BLUES:
FROM
SHANGHAI
TO BEIJING



Germany's Breitenfelde Chapter became the first foreign H.O.G.[®] chapter to visit China >

Text and photos: Daggy Gehm



In October 2015, 17 members of the Breitenfelde Chapter from northern Germany became the first ever international H.O.G.® chapter to take a tour of China. The 16-day tour from Shanghai to Beijing turned into a triumphal procession. The peaceful invasion of the Germans was given a rapturous reception, cheered on and escorted over long stretches by Chinese H.O.G. chapters and goggling onlookers in town and country. Even the law turned a blind eye, giving the group unrestricted access to tunnels and motorways that are normally off-limits to bikers. Some 500 police officers were deployed to ensure free passage to the metropolis Anyang with its population of more than five million. An amazing spectacle! And despite the uproarious receptions, there was still time to reflect on the ties that bind the two cultures as well as the things that still separate them.

An eternal handshake

High noon at the long, sandy bay. The ground rumbles, the air is set on fire, hazy forms emerge on the shimmering horizon. There's no turning back now. The encounter is inevitable, setting a precedent for all time. The pace slows, the thundering of thousands of horsepower grows louder. They come to a halt, only a few metres apart from one another: these strangers from the 'Land of the Setting Sun' and the men from the 'Middle Kingdom'.

Fearlessly, the two chiefs dismount from their steel horses and stride toward one another proudly. Man facing man, each clad in the regalia of their respective tribes. Two equals. Trigger fingers at the ready. *High Noon – Once Upon A Time In The West* – the scenes all merge together. You can almost hear a harmonica playing in the distance... or maybe this is just a trick of the mind caused by nerves that are stretched to breaking point. Everything happens in slow motion; even the dust that has just been kicked up settles in agonising slowness. The chief of the palefaces has no chance. Too quickly, the younger one draws his hand and clutches the raised hand of the older one, embracing him cordially. The stranger understands. The bond is sealed. For now, for always. At this historic meeting of East and West, between the Qingdao and Breitenfelde Chapters. At the long, sandy white bay on the East China Sea. A screenplay rewritten.

The strangers have come from far away. Their hosts have been patient. Both have waited a long time for this significant moment, which will go down in H.O.G.® history. There are more meetings between the German and Chinese chapters to come on this journey; not all of them movie material, but every one highly emotional and extremely heartfelt. It was as though they had known one another for an

eternity, as though they were finally meeting up again after years apart.

Late licence

Taking part in this first ever tour of China by an international Harley Owners Group® chapter were 17 members of the Breitenfelde Chapter from 40 kilometres south-east of Hamburg, comprising 13 riders and four passengers. This pilot project was organised by the Hamburg-based tour operator China Tours under the poetic name 'East Coast Blues'. The group rode from Shanghai to Beijing on their own Harley® bikes, which had been shipped over in advance as bike rentals are not currently possible in China (a situation that may soon change). According to Activities Officer Rudi Kentzler, who proposed and pushed for the pioneering trip and who also did a dummy run of the planned route beforehand by car: "The sticking point is the red tape: you need a Chinese driving licence, number plates, insurance and MOT. It took two days to get through all the necessary paperwork before we could really cut loose."

Everyone passed the driving test, despite one of the participants being colour blind. Perhaps it wasn't that big an issue, since red lights tend to be ignored by the locals in any case. The visitors joke that eating with chopsticks was more difficult than passing the driving test!

Frank and Victor – legends!

At the behest of Rudi, who assumed the role of Chapter Road Captain for the purposes of this special tour, the convoy was also to be led by a Chinese Road Captain: "He knows the way, I know the group." And the group's luck was in as two Chinese Harley legends were on board: Frank Zhu, leading the convoy with his vintage sidecar, and Li Mingtian, aka Victor, bringing up the rear as the sweep rider.

Both openly admit to feeling some trepidation before meeting the foreign



Days 1-3



bikers, fearing that the entire group would be man mountains like the alpha male Rudi with wild antics and riding at crazy speeds to boot. There was some irony when they discovered that, in fact, the opposite was the case as the Germans ride with considerably more discipline than their Chinese counterparts.

Frank and Victor are both intimately linked to the evolution of the Harley-Davidson® story within China. Blue Metallic was the first bike that Victor, 55, ordered ten years ago at a luxury fair – the first and only Harley in China when it was still a poor country. “At the time, it was very difficult to get a licence,” he recalls. In 2006, he was one of the founding members of the first Chinese chapter, and has held various positions in the chapter since that time. “Through the chapter, the path I have taken since the Cultural Revolution has been a very personal one. I know that I can no longer change China’s history. But through the example of the tough H.O.G. members from Breitenfelde, most of whom are much older than myself, I have realised that everything is still ahead of me, anything is possible.”

Frank Zhu organised the first Tibet rally and was the first Chinese Harley rider to cross Africa alone, covering 16,000km in 45 days. Today, he runs Frank’s Store in Shanghai and Tokyo, designing vintage-look biker fashions from second-hand materials. His stores are popular with many H.O.G. members, and he is a prominent figure in many Harley event photos.

Going the extra mile

The Chinese directors and dealers are very generous and flexible. Assistant Director Zhulin invited close to 100 of his chapter members alongside the German guests to a celebration at his restaurant >

Clockwise from top: The Breitenfelde Chapter together with Chinese Road Captain Frank Zhu (far left) and towering German Road Captain Rudi Kentzler (third from left); Bianka Jeewe and Berthold Paukner sign the chapter flag; a great reception in the picturesque village of Zhenjiang by the Yangtze River; the riders stop for a break beside a paddy field; Mike’s Harley® displaying German and chapter pennants; founder of Breitenfelde Chapter Björn Andersson on his nostalgic Harley in Zhujiajiao Water Town

China

Days 4-6

Yuan Wei (Best Taste) in Qingdao, which is richly decorated with Harley models and photos. The Shanghai Chapter has more than 1,000 members and, according to Hollis Zhao (the general manager of the first authorised H-D® dealership in China), there are between 7,000 and 8,000 Harley® riders throughout Shanghai. Although the Shanghai Chapter does not have a band, they organise a big tour five to six times a year – mostly male riders, and no passengers. Hollis believes that there is “big business potential for Harley-Davidson® in China due to the expanding wealthy middle class”. He is currently working hard to get H-D® Authorized Rentals up and running for visitors. Later, he covers more than 800km with a number of chapter members to this time welcome the German guests to Qingdao. Chinese hospitality!

Beijing Chapter Director Cui Ying Qi had to make a swift change of plans on account of the Breitenfelde Chapter being greatly delayed. Originally, his chapter members had wanted to escort the Germans to the Great Wall of China the same day. Instead, before the gates of Beijing, he has to put his foot down to accompany them to the hotel through the city's six ring roads. And it is all very last minute, because bikers are not permitted on the last three ring roads after 5pm. Thanks to the exceptional reputation of the Beijing Harley riders, the architect enjoys a good relationship with the transport police and he and his blockers escort us surprisingly quickly through the dense rush-hour traffic.

Harley® rock stars

Cui Ying Qi organised a great party with the exchanging of presents and signed flags. And, like all the preceding welcomes along the East Coast, the German bikers are treated like VIPs. They enjoy a rapturous reception wherever they go; emotional milestones along the long road of this epic journey. “You are so cool!” shout



Clockwise from top: Mike Güntner, complete with Chinese flag, looking like a mature Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*; a villager looks on at the Harley® convoy in surprise; Zhulin, Assistant Director of the Qingdao Chapter, signs the tank of Björn's bike; the coastal road near the fisherman's village of Qingshan; a wedding couple in the former German colony Qingdao enjoy posing on a Harley; the two cultures combine outside an archetypal Chinese temple

Days 7-12

young female bystanders, in awe of the rugged bikers. They are the centre of attention from start to finish, beginning with a procession along the Shanghai Bund waterfront. How can the striking Pudong skyline at the other side of the river compete with the sudden and crowd-pulling appearance of 17 Harley riders in leather jackets? In the city of Anyang in Henan province the bikers are received like visitors of state, with an impressive party in front of the luxury hotel in Beijing attended by around 100 Chinese bikers. A rash of selfies appears on social media and, before long, the German bikers are as celebrated as international rock stars. The hype surrounding the Harleys gathers momentum.

Perfectly styled, soon-to-be-married couples posing for wedding photos in front of the two churches in the former German colony Qingdao are somewhat overshadowed by the bikers. The couples take it in good sport, however, and even get in on the action, asking to have their photo taken on a Harley, and ideally with one of the German invaders, who despite the thundering engines and leathers have advanced peacefully into their pristine city.

When in China...

Like aliens from a distant galaxy, with their E.T.'s-head-like helmets and pennants of the Breitenfelde Chapter as well as the German flag streaming behind them, the group advance toward the East China Sea on their flashing 'spaceships'. The armada thunders over endless highways, meanders through pothole-dotted winding roads, and wends its way through dried-out riverbeds. For a moment in time, it awakens quiet hamlets surrounded by paddy fields, where cobs of corn dry in front of houses and fishermen sell their wares from >



Clockwise from top: dances being performed in front of the Temple of Confucius in Qufu; some of the 'aliens' landed on the Great Wall of China; Mike Güntner performs a handstand on the Great Wall of China in order to send a photo of it to his daughter back home; 'Gampei' – 'down it!' – at the invitation of the Shanghai Chapter; the friendly German invader Mike had a legion of Chinese admirers!

INFORMATION

Tour operator: China Tours Hamburg GmbH, www.chinatours.de

East Coast Blues route: Shanghai, Yangzhou, Lianyungang, Qingdao, Qufu, Tai'an, Anyang, Shijiazhuang, Beijing.

Highlights: Zhujiajiao Water Town, ferry across the Yangtze, former German colony Qingdao, Confucius' home town Qufu, sacred Mount Tai, the Great Wall of China.

Duration: 16 days, 11 of which were spent on Harleys. For 2016 it will be 18 days, with 13 spent on Harleys.

The next Harley tours through China: In 2016, the East Coast Tour is scheduled to run twice: July 25-August 11 and October 10-27. An additional tour is

rickety pick-up trucks. Never before has anyone in this area seen a Harley®. Farmers spraying the rice fields, old men lifting their gaze briefly from a game of Mahjong and soldiers on military exercises rolling along in their tanks all stare in wonder as the unusual bikes pass by.

With discipline, the convoy work hard at remaining in their two-wide lane formation. However, they have to be on the alert for the sudden appearance of a road sweeper, for instance, or three-wheelers crossing their path, goats getting caught in their wheels or big trucks or army tanks crushing them. As the motorways are not designed for bikers, there are no warning signs for impending bumps in the road that might lift you out of your seat.

Rocking the highway

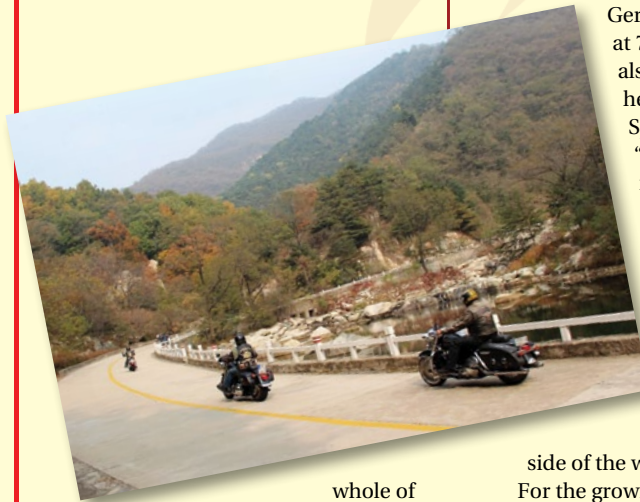
There is little respect for the rules of the road. Despite riding on the right, vehicles keep overtaking on the right and, even in big cities, traffic lights seem to be purely there for decoration. It would appear that the



Beijing Chapter Director Cui Ying Qi managed the impossible

planned for the foothills of the Himalayas. Chapters can also arrange a date to suit them.

Prices: were not fixed at the time of going to press, but they will be published on www.chinatours.de/east-coast-blues. Information will be available in English.



whole of China suffers from colour blindness, and not only one of our German riders. And despite speed limits of 50-60kph in built-up areas and 100-120kph on motorways, the locals always drive considerably faster.

Eventually, the Germans relax their strict observance of the rules and join the locals, overtaking on the right, running red lights, often riding faster than the limits permit. Paradoxically, this seems to help them blend into the traffic much more smoothly.

Eventually, they also get used to the unstable structures they encounter on their way – trucks with towering, loosely secured bar stools, for instance, or screaming pigs and lumps of rock. The best we can do is keep our heads down and have faith in our helmets. This does not affect the mood, however, and everyone remains in good spirits. Peter plays Hotel California as soon as the convoy rides into a service station. And while waiting for a breakaway group, Sönke's gravelly voice roars out over the highway with the

chapter song 'Hol die Kutte aus dem Schrank' ('Fetch your jacket from the closet') – this is a chapter-modified version of Kris Kristofferson's *Help Me Make It Through The Night*. Mike plays air bass guitar, Andreas air guitar, Rudi rocks out. The rest of the group grooves along. It's all going down in the middle of the G312. The highway rumbles. China looks on in amazement.

Harley® the status symbol

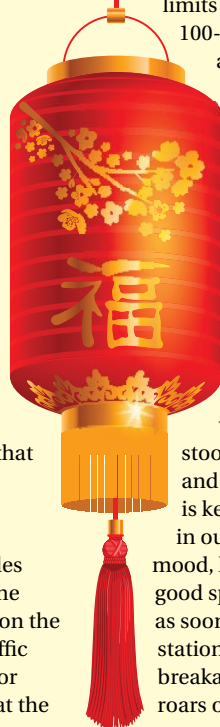
The surprise is great when the helmets are removed to reveal silver hairs. Many years separate the Chinese and the German bikers. Christa, who at 73 is the oldest biker, is also the only woman riding her own Harley – a black Sportster® 883 SuperLow®. "Mama!" shout the Chinese riders in excitement, lifting her in the air and clamouring for selfies. An expression of respect for the strong woman, and for the tough H.O.G.® members from Europe who every day are covering hundreds of kilometres on the other side of the world!

For the growing number of affluent Chinese who are many decades younger than this cool grandma, a Harley is more a status symbol than a lifestyle – particularly since the price of a Harley in China is more than double what you would pay in Europe. Most of these super-stylish youngsters have a very relaxed attitude to safety; many do not wear a helmet and the few female passengers prefer glitzy sneakers to sturdy biker boots. The young Chinese men tend to have a gelled, undercut hairstyle while the Germans go for a more cult look, some of them with a ponytail or mullet. Or like Mike Güntner who, when reclining on his Road King Classic, resembles a mature image of Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*.

The chapter is hailed by shouts of "Rudi!" as the alpha male heads toward the awaiting crowds with the air of an Indian chief on his red Heritage Softail® Classic. As they crowd around him, the big chief of the white Apaches graciously accepts the plaudits.

Handstand on the Great Wall

Björn Andersson lives and breathes Harley. The crowds surround his classic vehicle at every stop. For nights on end, the Dane worked on it, spending 150 hours in total



over six weeks. It had to be finished on time, his baby – a true original. A 1969 Harley-Davidson®, an early Shovelhead model. Andersson, who originally bought the bike from a customer, transformed it from a red and silver circus horse into a motorcycle superstar in an olive-green Mao look. He painted the route, H-D® Breitenfelde-Shanghai-Beijing, on the tank, to be joined later by the signatures of the Chinese Road Captain, directors and dealers. The Breitenfelde Chapter, which was formed 23 years ago, is now the third largest in Germany with more than 200 members. Every year, this strongly family-oriented chapter organises events for young and old, with Björn the central figure – always present, always at the heart of the action. At the Christmas party, he even played guitar with the chapter band. “It’s like Obama joining in a college band,” notes one member with admiration.

Björn, the tinkerer; the engine magician, the one all the other members rely on. The elf who, at night, checks the oil level of every bike, knows when the brake linings are worn out and brings tired motorcycles back to life with his magic hands. In a procedure akin to open heart surgery, he helps to get the flagging sidecar of the Chinese Road Captain Frank Zhu back on the road and repairs his own bike when his rear tyre is punctured by a nail. It happens shortly before reaching the Great Wall, which the others are already climbing and on which Mike is attempting a handstand to post a photo for his daughter.

Gampe! Gampei, Gampei

We continue to be amazed at the flexibility of the Chinese authorities, who made so much possible. We will take home with us memories of wide-screen panoramas of breathtaking scenery fleeting past, as well as masses of fast-growing skyscrapers. Our hearts will forever be imprinted with the triumphant receptions in the towns, with police escorts and wailing sirens and the overwhelming hospitality of the Chinese, which can bring a tear to the eye of even the most hardened rocker. Our recall of the German and Chinese celebrations, with the repeated chants of ‘gampei’ (‘down it’) whether for beer or rice spirit, will remain fuzzy. Burnt into our memories are the colourful dances in front of the Confucius temple in Qufu, the perceptible contrast after the roar of the engines in the peaceful gardens of Suzhou, the sacred Mount Tai, which can be scaled by climbing 7,200 steps. Legend has it that

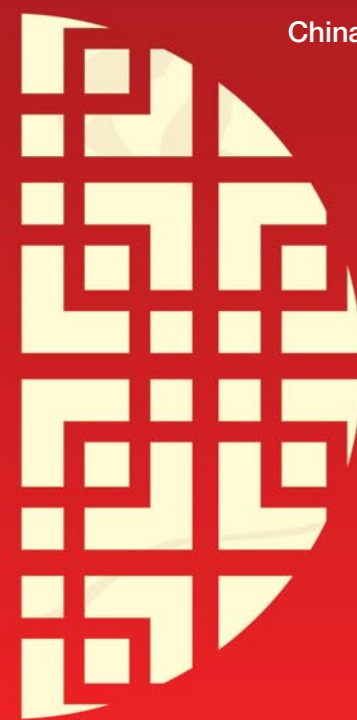
everyone who makes it to the top will live to be 100 years old. However, only Chapter Director Axel Schneider and Dealer Björn Andersson even made it to the midway gate, where they unfurled the Chapter flag among all the praying pilgrims. After all, a little help from above never did anyone any harm, especially bikers.

A fond farewell

At the port of Tianjin, where the Harleys were shipped back to Hamburg, the odometers showed an impressive 3,358km. This could be construed as a lucky number in China – 3 means life, 5 means I, 8 means fortune, which the optimistic H.O.G. members interpreted to mean “fortune will favour me my entire life”.

Beijing Chapter Director Cui Ying Qi views the meeting of the two cultures to be a particular stroke of good fortune: “As a relatively new Chinese chapter, we can learn a lot from the Germans; how to work together as a team, their interpretation of the Harley attitude to life. It was a shared experience of freedom and adventure, of endurance and team spirit.” And what about the Germans – what can they learn from the up-and-coming H.O.G. with a wise old soul from the Middle Kingdom? “Not to sit about moaning, but to take the bull by the horns and tackle the apparent problem head on. And if you suddenly have to switch from plan A to plan B, then get on with it instead of complaining. And once you’ve done it, get together afterwards and work through it.”

The foundations for an exchange have been laid. Next year, it will be the Chinese members’ turn to visit Germany (for Hamburg Harley Days® in June). As Confucius said, the journey is the reward. The proverb couldn’t be more apt for this journey, during which thousands of kilometres of asphalt have been covered and the whole of China appeared to lie before us. ■



About the author

The freelance journalist lives in Hamburg and prior to the East Coast Blues tour had only briefly sat upon a motorcycle two or three times in her life and never on a Harley, her dream bike. In China, she experienced Harley hopping, going from one Harley to the other as a passenger on around 12 different German and Chinese Harleys: “From the hard footstool to the sofa on wheels, all types of bike were represented. The young Chinese riders proved much more reckless than their German counterparts. Born to be wild! Taking photographs on steep winding roads on a Chinese mountain pass reminiscent of the Timmelsjoch pass in the Alps without holding on sometimes bordered on survival training. But, no risk no fun! I loved every second on the Harleys and felt extremely alive! I only realised the degree to which I had caught the Harley bug when all the passengers had to get into the escort vehicles before entering the motorway. Suddenly I was a caged animal. Separated from the pack, I felt cut off from the strong sensory impressions, from the sounds, the smells, the breathtaking sights – from intense experiences, from life in the fast lane.”