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Not-so-Splendid China

Visitors will encounter few lineups at this Florida-based fantasy land offering the country's historic landmarks in miniature

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KISSIMMEE, FLA. -- It's a bad sign when you tell a cab driver your destination and he asks you if you're serious. It's even worse when you arrive there and it looks empty and abandoned. Welcome to Florida Splendid China, a Chinese government-backed theme park near Orlando that seems to have given up on competing with its illustrious Walt Disney World and Universal Studios neighbours.

Built by the official China Travel Service, a government body aimed at promoting tourism, in the image of a similar, successful park in Shenzhen in the People's Republic, Florida Splendid China opened in 1993. The largest Chinese tourist promotion project in the United States, it aims to encourage visitors to plan a trip to the real thing.

The site features 62 miniaturized copies of historic landmarks from the Chinese region spread over 31 landscaped hectares. The brochure describes it as a "spectacular family theme park," but Mulan this isn't. There are no Disney-style rides, fireworks or multimedia thrills. There is also no danger of having to endure any 90-minute lineups. When I arrived at the park for its 9:30 a.m. opening time, there wasn't a single car in the parking lot. After staff unlocked the turnstiles and switched on the music, the park was opened to its first visitor of the day.

Splendid China took 120 stonemasons and artisans more than two years to build. Among the sites impressively reproduced here are the Stone Forest of unusual, natural limestone formations in southern China and the hillside Leshan Buddha statue in the southwestern province of Sichuan, the largest of its kind in the world. But it's the meticulous buildings, constructed in a variety of scales, most the size of mini-putt buildings, that are most striking. The Beijing area's well-known Chinese landmarks are represented here such as the Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven and the extravagant Summer Palace, undeniably grand even in miniature. The Midair Temple clings impossibly to a sheer rock face, and a copy of a Mongolian village is peopled by some of the 30,000 ceramic figurines that populate the park. There's also a reduced terra-cotta army, illustrating one of the greatest archeological finds in recent Chinese history. In 1974, a farmer in central China uncovered a vast army of lifesize terra-cotta soldiers, buried 2,000 years ago to guard the Qinshihuang emperor in the afterlife. While the original model army was 8,000 strong, there are only a few dozen replicas on display at Splendid China. And, of course, the Great Wall is here, enclosing many of the other structures within its almost one-kilometre-long stretch of six million domino-sized bricks.

But viewing the sites is not enough and the sparsely worded informational signs are a major failing. And since there are no wandering cast members, and no visual or virtual re-enactments to contextualize the copies, these potentially magical reproductions are as one-dimensional as the park's poorly written guidebook.

What information is provided predictably avoids any mention of historical persecution or the devastating effects of the Cultural Revolution on the people and places of the region. In the fantasy land of Splendid China, all is harmonious.

Not surprisingly, protesters have railed against Splendid China for portraying the region as a single, unquestionably unified nation. Critics charge that blithely presenting Tibet's Potala Palace -- the original residence of the Dalai Lama -- and remote northern villages as being part of the People's Republic are attempts to propagandize Chinese occupation of these regions, and that the large number of temples on display gives a false impression of religious tolerance.

But while park officials have denied any political motives behind Splendid China, the lack of visitors would undermine any real or imagined propaganda purpose anyway.

Although bankrolled by the Chinese government, poor attendance levels are clearly having an effect on the park's bottom line. Many of the lesser copies are paint-peeled and shabby with dozens of the ceramic figurines broken or toppled over. Grass pushes through cracks in the sidewalks around the park, many of the kiosks are abandoned and the few staff congregate around the entrance to ensure that they have someone to talk to.

Visitors are encouraged to stay for four daily shows on dance, costume, martial arts and music with the promise of a free evening meal in the park's Seven Flavors Restaurant.

Several other park restaurants remain empty and closed. The parade of gift shops, described in promotional literature as a "Chinatown with unique Oriental gifts," mostly hawks mass-produced goods masquerading as arts and crafts alongside ubiquitous Pokemon merchandise.

According to one gift shop employee, Florida Splendid China has not promoted itself well in its nine years of operation. As he dusted off guidebooks and straightened bent postcards, he predicted visitor numbers would soon

pick up. Behind him, an elderly couple headed for their car after turning back at the entrance: a six-hour wait for a free meal is not enough to convince even hardened bargain hunters with too much time on their hands that this a splendid place to spend a day.

Of course, if reverse psychology is at work here and disappointed park visitors are tempted to head to China for the real thing, Splendid China may well have fulfilled its tourism mandate.

Located about five kilometres west of I-4 (Exit 25B) on Highway 192, Splendid China is three kilometres from Walt Disney World. The park is open daily and hours vary by season. Entry is \$28.88 (U.S.) for adults, \$25.99 for seniors and \$18.18 for children 12 and under. For more information, visit <http://www.floridasplendidchina.com>

From the September 6, 2002 print edition  
Orlando Business Journal  
Tourism World

Splendid spin on resort: Bull from the China shop?  
Bob Mervine

Never say die.

A new version of Splendid China, the 76-acre Osceola County attraction that has teetered at the edge of insolvency for years, is headed for Holland.

Partly because of the Orlando park, not everyone is waiting with open arms.

True, the original 100-acre attraction was a big hit. But the original attraction is in Shenzhen, a heavily visited tourist area of China near Hong Kong.

The second park, owned by the government of mainland China, opened in Orlando in 1993. But the park's low-key approach — 62 miniature replicas of well-known Chinese landmarks — failed to draw Disney-size crowds. There was talk that it would be sold. Its manager was recalled to China and placed under house arrest. Today, it is the theme park equivalent of a ghost town.

Don't take our word for it. Calling the attraction "Not-So-Splendid China," travel writer John Lee described his visit to Splendid China earlier this summer in the Toronto Globe and Mail.

After a cab driver dropped him off, Lee says he watched the staff turning on the lights to welcome the first customer of the day: him. Lee describes peeling paint, overturned and broken figures and abandoned kiosks.

A broadcast news team for L1 television in Holland paid the park a visit last week and found much the same, although a spokesman says the park continues to draw a few hundred visitors a day.

That's a far cry from the 1 million annual visitors being touted for the third version of Splendid China, now slated to be built in the area of Zoetermeer, Holland, near the Hague — a popular tourist region and the seat of government for the country.

However, L1 news reporter Nico Fassotte says the proposed Sweet Lake Splendid China is far from a done deal.

"Our government is looking into the claims" of misrepresentation by the Chinese government "and may put a stop to the plans to build," says Fassotte.