

Kit Kat October 16, 2007

Mark Real
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Did I Learn Anything While Visiting 75 Countries?

Thank you, Artie, for that gracious introduction. Tonight, I will attempt to answer the question “Did I learn anything while traveling to 75 countries on six continents?”

One lesson I learned early was:

First Lesson: Be careful what you ask for: Cultural misunderstandings around

Early on, I was intent upon sampling local cuisine, staying in local hotels and avoiding “tourist traps”. Sometimes I copied travel writer Calvin Trillin. Trillin printed cards which read “I’ll have what the party at the next table is having” in the language of the country he was visiting.

As a result, I’ve eaten sea snake, pigeon, sheep’s head, goat’s head, warthog, zebra, kudu, Oryx, ostrich and dozens of other ingredients I was unable to identify or translate.

None of that prepared me for a special meal in Hanoi.

Dining in Hanoi.

Foreigners are forbidden to rent cars in Vietnam. Even if renting a car was an option you wouldn’t want to drive on narrow two-lane roads where the shoulder is used by pedestrians, then the inside of the road is filled with horse and goat driven carts, then the next narrow space is filled with bicycles, then motorbikes, while cars and trucks battle over the median.

At the end of a week of traveling together, I asked our driver and guide to select a “typical” local restaurant where they would be my guests for a special meal. Their faces beamed as we approached a restaurant overlooking a bridge constructed by Gustav Eiffel of Eiffel Tower fame.

However I became uneasy when we got out of the car and I could hear several dogs barking. “Here, you can pick the dog you want and they will cook it for us” translated my guide as he pointed out a corral full of dogs.

I had read about the Vietnamese males’ taste for dog during a full moon and I had seen street vendors selling canine shish-ka-bob to men in Korea, but I was completely unprepared and overwhelmed now that I saw these dogs. Visions of our childhood pet Old Yeller came into my mind.

Sorry, not here, I gestured backing away into the car

The driver and guide were visibly disappointed.

I became MUCH more precise in my questions about ingredients. We passed up several eateries specializing in cooking live snakes and lizards.

We ended up at a traditional restaurant serving com pha or chicken noodle soup the national dish of Vietnam. For 5 cents more, we ate in the air-conditioned room.

“Is better here”, my guide said as we tucked into our noodles, “no woof woof.”

My search for the typical also led me to

My one-man honeymoon in western Korea

In Seoul, I hired a guide named Mr. Kim who had just retired from 20 years in the Korean Marines and who was beginning a second career as a travel guide. The term beginning should have alerted me. He and I took the bullet train to western Korea to view the magnificent 7th century Buddhist burial grounds.

I told Mr. Kim I wanted to eat in “typical” restaurants and stay in hotels frequented by Koreans and not simply those catering to wealthy Japanese who comprise the bulk of Korean tourists. So, we ate tasty foods in market cafes. We rode local buses. We watched the locals in a sports bar of sorts cheer on the Korean national soccer team in a match with Holland.

Then we took a taxi to my hotel. He would be staying at a separate hotel for guides. When he helped me register, I drew some startled looks from the hotel staff which I dismissed as simple curiosity at the rare visit of an American.

It wasn't until I unpacked, showered and returned to the lobby that I noticed that all of the other guests were well-dressed young Korean couples, many holding hands, which is rare in a country where public displays of affection are frowned upon. There were no children and no grandparents.

After finding the concierge, I discovered that I was, indeed, staying in a typical hotel.

However, this was a hotel catering to Korean honeymoon couples.

My beginner guide had somehow failed to notice this small fact. The hotel staff had never before encountered a single guest and didn't want to be rude and so they had registered me.

I stayed the night, and then checked out early the next morning to look for another hotel. As I was leaving, a well-intentioned hotel staffer asked me politely if I wanted to reserve a seat on the 10am honeymoon cruise on the hotel's trademark "love boat." "Perhaps next time" I responded as I spotted a taxi.

Another lesson I learned was that English words can have a variety of meanings.

Rooting" for a sports team causes stir at Australian dinner

How many of you are familiar with the term "root" which Americans use as a synonym for cheer?

Australia has a popular program for visitors known as "dine with a local family". Visitors pay a fee that covers the cost of dinner and are connected with a local family.

Our host family picked us up at our hotel and took us to their home. We were exchanging stories about which sports teams we followed.

One of us mentioned that we "root" for Ohio State in football and the Cleveland Indians in baseball.

All conversation stopped. Our hosts looked stricken. We weren't sure why.

Finally, our host cleared his throat and told us-in a strangled voice-that "rooting" has a very rude meaning for Australians...ahem...think...marital act..... It is a term never used in polite company he said sternly.

Then, he added," but it sure livened up our dinner tonight"

A second lesson learned: Pay attention to maps

Like most of you, I attended schools where the pull-down classroom wall maps of the world placed the US at the center. I unconsciously accepted these maps as the natural order of things.

It wasn't until I was asked to speak in schools in other countries about what it meant to be American that I realized that most countries also place themselves at the center of the map.

When I spoke in an Irish classroom, the wall map had Ireland at the center and Ireland seemed much bigger than on US maps. I had the same experience in Indonesia

Now when we travel, I buy maps of the world in local children's school supply stores. In Athens, Greece I found a map that did not acknowledge the existence of its next door rival Turkey. In Guatemala City the official school map had a blank space for Mexico with whom it was having a border dispute at the time.

I was asked to speak to a high school world history class in Shanghai and noticed that the classroom map placed China at the center of the map and thus at the center of the world. My message to those students was that seeing the world through the eyes of others helps us stand in their shoes and gain an appreciation for their world view.

Everywhere we have traveled, people are curious about America and Americans. Nowhere are people more curious than in emerging democracies.

Lesson Three: Democracy is powerful

I visited Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic, in 1990 the summer after the Berlin Wall came down and Soviet troops were withdrawing. Prague's Saint Wenceslas Square where pro-democracy forces gathered to protest the Communist government in 1968 and again in 1999, was filled with people.

Long lines of Czechs waiting for the delivery of the first Czech translation of the playwright Vaclav Havel's heretofore banned works. Bookstore clerks frantically opened boxes of books that had never been available before as long lines of customers chatted with excitement and looked on expectantly.

Nearby, hundreds of people lined up in front of display window televisions to watch videos of the Russian invasion of Prague in 1968 and the brutal crushing of dissent. These scenes had never been shown in the Eastern bloc. The crowd watched in reverential silence. Some shed tears. Others clenched their fists in rage.

A few blocks away, Playboy magazine released its first edition in Czech to long lines of men and boys. Local wags claimed Playboy wasted its money translating the articles since most buyers weren't going to read the articles anyway.

That week I was honored to be an observer of the committee drafting a new constitution for this emerging democracy. Under communism everything had

been secret. Now, as a fledgling democracy, there was a chance to open up all government decision-making to the public and to the media.

I was asked to explain how the annual budget was the chief policy-making document for all levels of government in the US.

A skeptical minister-to-be challenged me. "What did I mean by making the budget and budget assumptions public?" I explained that making the budget proposal public meant inviting scrutiny from allies and critics as well as the media.

"You mean our enemies could get a copy?"

Yes, and because your assumptions will be in the budget, you will be able to explain the rationale for your proposals I responded.

"Why would we help our enemies?" he bellowed as he stormed out of the meeting. I wasn't shocked when the country divided a few years later.

In addition to the downfall of many communist dictatorships, the world has been fortunate to have seen the collapse of apartheid in Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa. We were fortunate to visit

Visiting the cell where Nelson Mandela spent 19 of his 27 years in prison

Visiting Robbins Island off the coast of Cape Town South Africa is a bit like visiting a combination of Alcatraz and Valley Forge for Americans. Robbins Island has the most scenic view of Cape Town's famed harbor and Table Mountain but it is sacred ground in the new South Africa.

Here, on Robbins Island, eight miles of choppy sea from land, South Africa imprisoned all of the black and Asian leaders of the pro-democracy movements. Here, apartheid dictated that black prisoners received lesser amounts of protein, jam, bread and tea than Asian or white prisoners.

Here, prisoners were refused cots or beds and slept on cold concrete floors until international pressure led to inspections by the Red Cross.

Here, Nelson Mandela learned Afrikaans, the language of the Boers, and was able eventually to converse with and govern white South Africans.

And, here, ironically, also imprisoned, were the men who would lead the cabinet of the first democratically-elected government of South Africa.

We had read that most visitors were likely to be black South Africans and that few white South Africans visited because it was too uncomfortable. This was not the case in our tour group.

All of the guides are former political prisoners. A few are even former guards. Our guide, who had been jailed for 22 years, asked everyone in the group to introduce themselves. Several white South African families were in our group as the winter holidays and school vacations were just beginning.

The tour was somber as we reflected on the isolation of these prisoners, but also quite hopeful when we realized that these cells had become an academy of sorts for the leaders of the first democratically-elected government of South Africa.

We left South Africa vividly aware of the many challenges the country faces, but also very hopeful about the future of democracy.

However, another lesson I've learned is that humility is in order when making any kind of predictions.

Lesson four: Humility is in order

I visited Communist East Berlin in the summer of 1989 and reported in a family newsletter article entitled "Perestroika not spoken here" that the police state was intact. A few months later, I and millions of others watched in amazement and joy as the Berlin Wall fell.

After watching the Wall come down on television one of my aunts called to advise me not to quit my day job to become a commentator on foreign affairs.

My aunt's insights into international events were appreciated by me again this week when new college students at the Newman Center at Ohio State University asked, "What Berlin Wall?"

Lesson five: don't be afraid to sight-see

Some of the most interesting travel scenes involve contrasts between old and new. For example:

- 1) Flying on Communist government-owned Air Vietnam into Saigon where we were greeted by an airport bus brightly painted with "Pepsi-Cola Welcomes you to Ho Chi Minh City."
- 2) Observing a Shanghai man conducting business on a cell phone while computing on an ancient abacus.

- 3) Watching a Portuguese boy sitting on a donkey engaged in the centuries-old work of picking olives while he listened to music on his Walkman,
- 4) Spotting US sports tee-shirts in Africa. We saw a little girl in Zambia wearing a Boston Bruins hockey tee-shirt in a tropical village that lacked electricity and had never seen ice.
- 5) Observing cell phone use: by a runner in Monaco during a 10-K race, by a boy riding a water buffalo in a Malaysian rice paddy, by Hong Kong visitors at the shrine of the world's largest Buddha
- 6) Registering for a tour of the Swedish Safety Net nursing homes and child care centers. Then, arriving and being told dismissively that the tour was cancelled because "it didn't make money."
- 7) Hiking on the same mountain paths in Morocco as rural Muslim women wearing the traditional chador and head scarves. However, we could see their Christmas tree socks peeking out from under their robes.

Where to next?

My wife Sue shares my love of travel and exploration. In fact, we are going hiking in Panama where we will also kayak in the Panama Canal over Thanksgiving.

And, we managed to take our own honeymoon-together-in Morocco four years ago.

During our lifetimes, we have been able to visit several places that were previously closed because of war or dictatorships: Northern Ireland, Bulgaria, Romania, East Germany, Hungary, Beijing, Cuba, Chile, Namibia and South Africa.

In the future, it would be wonderful to visit a peaceful Sudan, now war-torn. National Geographic photographers recently spotted previously unknown large herds of elephants, zebras and giraffes. Imagine an eco-tourism industry developing to provide job and entrepreneurial opportunities for local people.

The Congo is filled with exotic wildlife, but a civil war rages. A peaceful Congo would allow us to observe the natural setting of bonobos, a primate considered by some to be the most intelligent animal. The bonobos at the Columbus Zoo are indigenous to the Congo and no where else.

Someday, I hope we could visit the peaceful cities of Tehran, Damascus, Beirut and even Baghdad where religious freedom was a reality.

Imagine visiting a democratic Afghanistan, Cuba, China or North Korea.

The question posed tonight was whether I learned anything in my travels. I will let you be the judge

The freedom to travel is something we Americans take for granted. I was vividly reminded of this while escorting a group of East Germans to Niagara Falls on their first trip abroad after Germany had been reunited.

Upon crossing into Canada and seeing the falls, one man shouted in jubilation "We are here and the secret police are not."

Thank you for inviting me to deliver this paper.