

BEIJING - (First chapter of Travel write-up by Danny Gil for his school friends)

One of the certainties about travel is that it always will be interesting, regardless of whom you're with, and where you go. That was stated by Rory as a comment to one of those earlier Rome episodes I had written.

This China trip is turning to be no different. For starters, seventeen people from various backgrounds already is a good reason.

The plane ride on a China Air jumbo from JFK to Beijing was smooth and uneventful. Most of us checked in at JFK separately and got scattered throughout the plane. I found myself up front on an aisle seat with an empty adjacent seat. That was great, because that's where I placed the paper bag containing my laptop computer.

Digression: since the Italy trip, I vowed to travel even more lightly, and for this week's worth of travel, decided to use corduroy and other wear that is reusable for 1-2 days. This was after a spate of email from our host wherein the subject of dress code was clarified: no business suits, just casual wear. But to compensate sartorially, I decided to wear my brand new made-in-Italy leather shoes we bought in Venice 2 weeks earlier. And after I packed all my gear into the green hand-carry luggage Lisa had used, it looked so travel-perfect, that at the last moment on impulse, I threw in the laptop, sans case. My reasoning was simple: I wasn't bringing any cell phone and surely there'd be internet access out there so that's how I'd communicate home. While there were phones to use from the hotels, the 12 hr time difference would be problematical. And I also could play solitaire and do other computer things in the wee hours of the evening.

Well, at the ticket counter, they told me that my luggage was too heavy. I'd have to check it in, and they strongly suggested to hand carry the laptop. From the small clutch bag I had, out went the book I intended to read, and in went the power transformer and mouse. The laptop couldn't go in the clutch bag, so I had to literally carry it. Once in the gate area, I bought a magazine and asked for a large bag, got a paper bag, and that's where the laptop went into.

On the plane, I had two panic situations. The plane left JFK at about 6 in the evening, so most of the 13 and a half hour flight would be sleep time, if at all. But I did doze off after removing my shoes, and when I awakened to go to the restroom the first time, I fumbled to put on my shoes and noticed them a bit tighter than usual. The next time I went, the shoes were definitely much tighter, and as I struggled to put them on in panic, I conjured visions of coming back from China with smaller, squished dainty feet like those of the Chinese high born ladies of yore. But I was half awake, so I did perish the thought. What was real was when we were deplaning and I reached for my wallet in my back pocket and it was gone! Déjà vu all over again? My pants weren't even slashed. Aha, it had slipped out and was on the seat. I thanked my stars that I had instinctively reached for my wallet.

This reminds me of a joke from Manny about a Catholic priest and Jewish rabbi who survive an auto crash and the priest comments on how the rabbi did make the sign of the

cross, to which the rabbi retorted: No I didn't, I just reached for my spectacles, my testicles, my bank book and my wallet, too check if all were still there. Obviously, his bankbook and wallet were at his two shirt pockets.

As for the shoes, I kept them on, and apparently, they stretched after being warmed, and were comfortable the rest of the time. (Later Bopeep sent a rejoinder that's it's the feet that swell).

In this group of seventeen, there were three hosts: two were from Vitec, the sales company representing the Broad chiller line (Bill a Caucasian, and Fred an American of Turkish descent), and Al from the Broad NY office, an Iranian, hired just a few months ago. Rounding up the group were four Indians (my boss included), two Chinese, me, and the rest were all Caucasians; engineers all, except for two who were architects. Many of them were senior partners, although there was one young guy, Adam. Later we found out this was his first trip on an airplane, and that prior, he indeed had gone as far as Florida, by car.

The Beijing airport was new, modern, and clean. The architect in our group stated it must have been designed by Germans. We got met at the arrival area by a tall, pretty, young Chinese lady with the "Welcome Broad" sign (I found that really funny if it had been she we were welcoming), got herded into a bus, and then had the headcount. There was an extra person, said the girl. In her halting English, she said her list only has 16 people. Who was the extra? So she read off the names, excruciatingly pronounced. Well, I was not on her list.

It turns out the Vitec and Broad people made a boo-boo. Vitec had me on their list, but since they had processed my passport for a China visa at the last moment after I came in from Italy, somehow my name wasn't communicated to the Broad NY office for the hotel and local plane arrangements!

But the bus ride from the airport was unusually long and the girl could make all the arrangements on her cell phone. It wasn't perfect; one of the 16 rooms had to be changed to a suite, and at least for tonight, two of us would have to share the suite, which they said had two private rooms. The Vitec guy, Fred, gallantly said he'd share the suite with me, after all, he insisted, he was host.

The traffic was really bad, and it took almost two hours to get to the restaurant near the hotel. We were on an elevated highway creeping along bumper to bumper until we saw the cause: an accident which had closed the 3 lane road to just one lane. Must have been really bad because there were hordes of people. Meanwhile, we drank in the sights of the city: tall, new modern buildings flanking elevated highways, neon lights, new cars and taxis darting in and out of traffic. Some of the taxis had GPS screens, and at least a couple had TVs on the front seat headrest for the passenger's use.

Finally, the bus parked and we staggered into the restaurant. It was past 9 in the evening. Dinner was a Chinese lauriat. Many of the guests never used chopsticks before, much

less partaken of the usual fare of duck, seaweed, and other exotic Oriental food. Plus, there were four Indians, in various levels of vegetarianism. Indeed, a few seemed to be turning green behind the ears. But most of all did manage dinner.

Communication with the locals was handled primarily by our pretty Chinese guide, but augmented greatly by the two Chinese in our group, John and Paul. John is the Principal and CEO of his Company.

Fred and I got to our suite at past 11 pm. We fumbled for the light switch and none of the lights responded. Fred felt his way to a phone and called the front desk. Then I remembered that in most Asian hotels, you have to slip in your magnetic card key into a slot near to door to get the power on. Such was the case in our HK visit 2 years ago; many Philippine hotels have the same thing. It worked just when a maintenance man came up.

The suite didn't have two rooms, but just one, and there was a cot outside the sofa in the main living area. However, there were 1-1/2 bathrooms (only the one in the bedroom had full shower and tub), 2 TVs, etc. Fred insisted that I take the bedroom, and he'd sleep in the cot, and just sneak into the bathroom in the morning. He again reiterated he was the host. As we chatted, it turns out that he indeed is the host of us all: he is the owner of Vitec, and while Broad is paying for all expenses when in China, he is paying for all airfare to and from the US, the lion's share. I also found out he is a pilot and was in the process of buying a private plane. I figured it was not just his engineering skills, but also his Middle-Eastern family background in business acumen that got him this far. Later on, with a few others, we each had occasion to expound on ones life's philosophy.

The next day would be a visit to Tiananmen Square and to the Great Wall.



The Broad girl and David, one of the architects, at Tiananmen.