

TRAVELOGUES

by

P.F. Uhlir

Preface

I have been writing observations about my travels around the world for over a quarter century. I began with my first visit to China, a country that I have visited the most but not the longest, in 1992. I have been to over 50 countries at this point, most of them multiple times and some as early as the 1960s. I have chronicled the most interesting experiences, although not necessarily the most frequent ones.

They are arranged in alphabetical order, rather than in a chronological one or some other scheme. They also are very much a work in progress, either as I find time to put past experiences in writing or have new ones I wish to document. I will add to them as time goes on.

These travelogues can be viewed as my attempts to document what may be interesting to others, but it is also something for me to record for posterity, when I cannot travel anymore or I am no longer around. Some people would prefer to sell their travel experiences, but I have no such ambitions even if it were in some cases possible. I therefore have licensed these writings under a Creative Commons attribution-only, common-use license, so the reader can share them without any legal constraints.

Please send me your thoughts about this or your travel experiences whenever you feel like it. I can be reached at: pfuhilir@gmail.com.

Paul F. Uhler
January 2017



TRAVELOGUES by Paul F. Uhler is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

BHUTAN

Notes from the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan
October 2014
by
P.F. Uhlir

I have wanted to go to Bhutan since the late 1980s. A colleague and co-author of mine, Bill Bishop, who was the Deputy Administrator of NOAA in the mid-1980s, went there at the time and raved about it.

Flash forward a quarter century and I am on a flight from Delhi to Paro with Meimei. We have decided to go for a private tour there, since I have a free ride with work to Delhi for a CODATA – World Data System “SciDataCon” conference the following week. Meimei will explore a bit of India while I’m attending that meeting.

The Royal Kingdom of Bhutan is a land-locked, mountainous country nestled between northern India and southern China and Tibet. It is very small, about 300km x 500km, and has a population of some 650,000.

The flight is operated by Druk Air Royal Bhutan Airlines, the only airline company of Bhutan. Druk means “dragon” in Bhutanese and is the national mascot. It is a fearsome symbol, but belies the very peaceful and spiritual nature of the Bhutanese.

I tell the steward onboard that in Czech, the word for dragon is “drak”, which must derive from druk. Of course, there is also “Dracula” in Romania and even the word “dragon,” itself. He tells me that there are some pilots of Czech origin flying the Druk Airlines, and I tell him that I have a couple pilots in my family.

In any case, the aircraft is quite nice, a 300 series Airbus jet, with leather seats and very pleasant and efficient service. It is a two-hour journey. The lunch is quite bad, but we try a Bhutanese liquor, which is a whiskey, and it is surprisingly smooth. There are close mountains on either side and immediately below us as we approach the airport in Paro. It is both beautiful and disconcerting. The pilot has said three times already “not to be alarmed” by the proximity of the mountains in our landing, and he’s not kidding.

We land in the town with about one hour of daylight left. We get our luggage and go through customs in a few minutes and are met by Tshering & Tshering, the first names of our young guide and driver. They are male and female, but have the same name. Even our tour owner, whom we corresponded with by email in the months before, is named Tsering (Penjor), or “TP”. Our car is a small Hyundai SUV, adequate for the Bhutanese roads.

We head off for Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, as the sun sets. Although they drive on the British side of the road, as they do in India, I am reassured by the fact that all the signs are in English and the road is well paved.

* * *

We arrive at the “Peaceful Resort” in Thimphu about 1.5 hours later. The last 10 minutes or so in the town are spent going up, up, up. I have no idea what to expect, other than a “3-star hotel”, but it is very pleasant. It is a stone building with extremely accommodating staff. I pick up a copy of the local paper in the lobby. Inside it has a Quote of the Day: “The problem with people who have no vices is that generally you can be pretty sure they’re going to have some pretty annoying virtues.” – Elizabeth Taylor. I subscribe to that notion, but it is at odds with the purist Bhutanese ethos.

Our room is large and clean, with a wood slat floor and a marble bathroom. It has a big balcony that curves around the bedroom. Dinner is at 7:30 and it is a communal deal, buffet style. We sit with two women from London and have a nice conversation with decent food. It is mostly stir-fried veggies, roast bass presumably from the local river, and beers brewed in Bhutan, which are quite good.

After dinner I read the better part of “The White Tiger”, the winner of the UK’s Man Booker prize in 2008. It was highly recommended to me by Prof. Jerry Reichman of Duke Law School a few years ago and I picked it up at the hotel convenience store in Delhi on the morning before we went to Bhutan. I go to bed around midnight, but I wake up at 3:00, not only because I am still jet lagged but because there are packs of stray dogs barking in the vicinity. Bhutan is the “Land of the Stray Dogs”. If New Zealand has 5 or 6 sheep for every inhabitant, surely Bhutan has a similar ratio of dog to man. I sleep only a little the rest of the night.

* * *

We meet our guide and driver, and go for a day of sightseeing in Thimphu. It is a small city of about 100K people nestled along a valley and a small river. The Bhutanese architecture is quite attractive, with many of the nicer houses looking like a cross between an Alpine chalet and a wealthy Chinese farmhouse. They are large box shaped structures, usually with three floors, and having a lot of windows—either 3 or 4 panes next to each other. The roofs are usually raised, with some air circulating under them. There must be some reason for this, but I have not yet asked Mr. Google.

These houses are interspersed with what can only be called shacks, with corrugated metal roofs and large stones on top to keep them from blowing off. We are told that everyone here is happy, but I don’t believe it. The poverty rate, as measured by Bhutan standards, is a hefty 25%, although there are no homeless people or beggars that one can see, and education and health care are free.

Because the country is devoutly Buddhist, there are many temples everywhere, including convents, monasteries, and religious shrines, the most ubiquitous of which are called “stupas”. Our first stop in the morning is a fancy Buddhist shrine—the Choeten—that was built for a prematurely deceased prince a few decades ago. The royalty in Bhutan is revered when living and acquires divine status when they die, with the state government and the Buddhist religion intertwined.

Once a year there is a festival that lasts a couple of weeks in which most of the country's populace comes to the Choeten to pay their respects to the prince. We are there the day before the festival ends. The worshippers (and many people on the street) are all dressed in native costumes. The men have what looks like a bathrobe or tunic with large sleeves that are differently colored and the tunic is tied around the middle. The robe goes below the knees and they all have knee-high socks and black shoes. The women all wear a blouse with a long, wrap around or sari. The colors for both tend to be striped maroon, brown, and orange. Since most of the people are rather short, it looks like a nation of hobbits.

They worship by going around the shrine in circles clockwise, chanting along the way. The more circles you make, the more divine energy you receive, according to our devout guide. The worshippers leave packages of snacks in large bins as their alms, which provide a WalMart-like ambience to the festivities. Some of them sit and watch the spectacle while praying or chanting. Others prostrate themselves on wooden boards that surround the circular passageway.

We go around the shrine two or three times and then go inside the temple. We have to remove our shoes to go inside, just like we do for all Buddhist temples, but surprisingly very few of the throngs of worshippers outside go in as well. We look at the ornate sculptures and wall paintings and then go up a couple steep staircases, including balconies around each floor, from which we can get a very good view of Thimphu.

After about an hour of this, we leave for another shrine, this one a giant Buddha on the side of a hill overlooking the city. The statue is about 20m tall and sits atop a larger shrine, but both are closed to the public. A parking lot is being built all around the place. We are told that some investors from Singapore are footing the bill of this Buddha on the hill.

Next we go to the national dzong, or fortress, which houses the government offices—the king, the ministries, and Buddhist priests. It is the Bhutanese equivalent of the Prague castle, but not as nice. We go through metal detectors going both in and out (presumably to inhibit pilfering). There is a large courtyard in the middle, but entry to most of the buildings is prohibited. Outside, there is a large rose garden, with many roses still blooming in late October. About 100m further is the royal residence, off-limits to us commoners, which houses the very handsome king and the beautiful queen. The queen looks exactly like a younger Catherine Zeta-Jones. Gorgeous. The Bhutanese all appear to adore them.

After a non-descript buffet lunch at the “Edelweiss Restaurant,” we go to a farmers’ market that has perhaps 30 concrete stalls of imported Indian produce on the ground level and the same number of local Bhutanese produce on the top level. Although the produce looks very nice and is cheap (\$0.50/kilo for daikon radishes, for example), it is all the same. Further on there is some pig meat (pork belly slabs and mean looking sausages) and some cheese, but we are certainly not about to buy any. There are no foodies in Bhutan.

On the way out, we stop at an archery field, the “Changlimethan” sports grounds, where several archers are practicing shooting at a small target about 100m away. I cannot even see the target very well and am amazed that the archers can even reach it, much less hit it. I think it would be fun to watch a tournament in the mountainous kingdom sometime with the hobbit-folk.

We end the afternoon with some shopping at the local stores and the “national folk emporium”. Very disappointing. I buy a picture book and put off buying some tee shirts and whiskey for a later date. Meimei finds nothing to buy at all.

It is now after 3 p.m. and we are both exhausted. The tour is over for the day and it is just as well. We go back and I take a 3-hour nap, getting up just in time to have dinner. The food is so-so, but I am not here for the gastronomy. Afterwards I finish “The White Tiger” and get another six hours of sleep.

* * *

In the morning we need to leave by 7:00 because we have a very long and arduous drive ahead of us. We also need to arrive at a certain point at a certain time, when the road is open one-way in our direction. It is definitely the most scenic day we will have.

Once we depart Thimphu the road quickly turns ugly. Not from the landscape, mind you, which is beautiful, but because the constructed environment is deteriorating. In short, the roads suck. As we go forward, we alternate between a very beat up paved road and an unpaved dirt road, all of which lays in an endless mess of steep serpentines. It is “The Land of 10,000 Serpentines”. Indeed, the dragon on their flag is a long, winding serpent—a perfect representation of the Bhutanese roads.

We go up the mountain until we reach the summit—the “Dochula pass.” There we see a construction of 108 stupas, commemorating the soldiers killed (yes, they have an army) in the short 2003 border dispute they had with India. More important, however, is the clear and spectacular view of the Himalaya range in the distance. Although our time is limited, we take a lot of pictures.

We begin our tortuous descent. It takes about an hour to go down about 2,000m. On the one side of the road are cliffs or steep mountain sides; on the other side is a precipice. In the middle is some sort of road, usually big enough for one vehicle. When encountering another vehicle, you can move off the road toward the side of the mountain, if there is space, or if you are on the other side, you have the luxury of moving even closer to the precipice. Fortunately, given the quality of the road surface, no one can travel faster than 5km-30km/hour, but people pass slower moving vehicles frequently, despite very little visibility around the curving road.

Most of the vehicles are trucks, followed in order of frequency by tour buses or SUVs, small public buses, private cars, and taxis. They are all representative of the economics of the country.

By far the most interesting are the trucks. Most of them are rather ornate, painted in the five Buddhist colors—white (for the air), red (for fire), green (for water), yellow (for earth), and blue (for the universe). Some of them have an intricate silver lattice work above their windshield or on their grill. All of them have an eye painted above each headlight. They also have signs written on their front, side, and rear. The side one usually says “No Entry”, but sometimes says “Passengers Only“. We followed one truck for a while that had “No. Girls No. Crazy” written on its rear bumper (punctuation as written). The trucks are emblematic of much of the commerce in the country.

The tour vehicles are plentiful as well and represent a big segment of the economy—the tourist trade. These are divided into small buses or vans, transporting groups of travelers, and SUVs carrying 1-4 people in more private tours. All have a driver and a guide. The tours are very expensive; we paid about \$5,000 for a 6-day trip (including R/T airfare from Delhi, but not incidentals and tips). The Bhutan government gets about \$70/day from each traveler, plus 20% tax, which adds up. There are some 230,000 tourists who go to the country each year, so that's over \$200M/year, not including what they all spend in addition to the base tour price. Not bad for a country that only has about 650,000 citizens.

The public buses—both intra and inter-city—are the most common way for the Bhutanese to get around. They are ubiquitous and quite inexpensive, but slow. Our guide takes a bus to visit her family in her home town in northern Bhutan and it takes her over two days to travel about 300km. For shorter trips, there are numerous taxis, although these are obviously more expensive. The least plentiful are the private cars. Our guide tells us that few Bhutanese have cars, which explains why there are so many public transports.

From the pass on top of the mountain we also see a big change in the vegetation. On the Thimphu and Paro side of the mountains, the hills are all covered with pine trees of all kinds. When we begin our descent, however, we see a dramatic change in the flora. Down, down we go for about 1 hour. In the middle of the mountain, the canopy changes to mostly deciduous trees. By the time we arrive at the bottom, it is semi-tropical, with ferns, flowers, cacti, and an occasional banana tree by the side of the road. There are many rice paddies, neatly terraced in the often steep mountain sides. Instead of the 5C + wind chill at the pass, it is now a balmy 18 or 20C. In the sun it is short-sleeve weather.

We come upon a river, which flows through Punakha, the ancient capital up river and a smallish town, where we actually go. After a quick pit stop, we continue along another river. The road snakes along the large creek, climbing up several hundred meters. Houses and rice paddies dot the mountain sides. It is really beautiful scenery.

We cross a small bridge and begin another ascent along a treacherous road (but aren't they all?). It is very slow going, but soon we lose sight of the creek below us as we change from a mostly water-based landscape to a truly mountainous one. The houses and rice paddies become less frequent, but still persist in the extreme isolation of the dramatic landscape. You are left wondering how they survive, although surely there are much more lonely places farther away from town.

We drive by a couple of small hamlets; a handful or perhaps a dozen houses and shacks. Cattle roam unattended along the road and every once in a while there are a few horses and always the ubiquitous dogs. We arrive near the top of our second range and have lunch at the Kuenphen Restaurant, Sonam Dorji, proprietor. We are in Nobding, Wangdue Phodrang, which translated into English means “nowhere”(but I am just making that up). The food is quite good and definitely better than expected. The view, however, is magnificent, with snow-capped peaks interspersed with clouds and mist in the not too distant horizon. We buy some small bottles of K5 premium whiskey for later occasions and take a bunch of pictures.

After lunch, we go the last leg of our trip over the final rise to the Phobjikha valley below. It is at the end of the road. We go to a Gantey Gompa monastery that is like most of the others we see and then walk about 3km through the pastures and forest on a nice path to another temple, where we meet our car again.

The hotel—the Gakiling Guest House—is new, but rustic and basic, and the food is adequate, but the worst of the trip. In the early evening we have a “hot stone bath,” that takes 2.5 hours to heat up. It is in a very small, ramshackle wooden structure that’s exposed to the elements. There is one wooden tub, big enough for us two, with some aromatic herbs floating on top. There is a separate chamber in the tub that holds the hot stones and heats the water. The floor is made of round stones which make it difficult to walk.

The water in the tub is lukewarm, however, and we both start to laugh at the “luxury” we have paid some \$25 to enjoy. The hosts no doubt hear us laughing and offer to add more hot stones that are being heated by an open fire in between the wooden shack and the house next door. They use large metal pincers to put in another four stones and the water heats up. They add another two and the bath gets quite hot. We spend about 20 minutes in the tub and it is enough for the experience. The open fire near wooden structures, the compartment with the hot stones immediately adjacent to the tub we are in, the gritty tub that is washed indeterminately, and the wooden shack itself, would never pass any safety or sanitation standards in other lands, but it is an experience nonetheless.

* * *

After a very mediocre breakfast we go to the black-necked crane visitor center. The cranes are an endangered species, numbering only 800 or so, which migrate for the winter months from Tibet to several places in Bhutan. The Phobjikha valley is the largest of these sanctuaries. They generally arrive between late October and early November, but we are apparently too early to see them. They supposedly circle the monastery twice when they arrive and when they depart in March. All we see is the documentary film, though.

We then retrace our journey to Punakha, one of the former capitol cities. Along the way we stop to take a picture of a doorway with the two painted phalluses on it (for fertility); take pictures of a butchered cow carcass that is hanging out to dry, covered with flies; and buy some fruit at a roadside stand. Meimei gets some unripe persimmons and we have some green tangerines (we thought they were limes) that our guide has bought. The tangerines are not bad, though they smell better than they taste.

We get back to the small town by the river near Punakha and have a reasonably good lunch. There are some stores nearby with more wooden phalluses in various colors and shapes. In the U.S., they would have batteries and be in a XXX store. After lunch we walk about 2km to another monastery, where young monks are training to play very long brass instruments. Riicola anybody?

We complete the day by going to a fabulous dzong at the intersection of two small rivers. Punakha was the capital before Thimphu and this was a royal dzong. It is truly photogenic and

we spend a good hour inside taking pictures. It is much nicer that the dzong in Thimphu and it is the place where the current royal couple got married.

We then go to our hotel, which is probably the nicest of the whole trip and certainly most scenically placed. The main hotel overlooks the river down below, but our room looks out on the terraced rice paddies and mountains in the background. Even better. We sit out on the balcony before dinner and sip our K5 whiskey. The hotel has good food and we watch some of the 45 channels on the satellite TV in our room afterwards.

* * *

In the morning, we go back over the pass to Thimphu. The top of the mountain is draped in clouds and we cannot see the Himalayan range. We were lucky to get the sunny view earlier. We visit the 108 stupas and have tea in the mountaintop restaurant, and then head down to Thimphu.

On the way, Tshering puts a DVD on in the SUV. It is a documentary about Bhutan and an interview with the former Prime Minister. We learn that Bhutan was a monarchy and only became a parliamentary democracy in 2011. In the 1980s, the country expelled some 100,000 people of Nepalese origin who are still living in refugee camps in Nepal. This “ethnic cleansing” appears to be a big stain on their reputation as a peace-loving people and the lack of any successful resolution continues to haunt them.

However, we are told that Bhutan measures its GNH (gross national happiness) rather than its GNP. Indeed, the country is devoutly Buddhist and strives to live symbiotically with its natural environment. Hunting and fishing are prohibited. It is renowned internationally for its public policies and I am an admirer.

We arrive at Thimphu and have lunch at a different restaurant, which is worse than the last. The noodles taste like they were laced with kerosene, but they are probably spiced with betel nuts, which our guide and driver chew after meals, and which are kitchen-clean.

We go on to Paro, another previous capital of Bhutan, and the place of the only airport in Bhutan where we first landed. In Paro, we first go to the national museum, which is very small, but has an extensive mask collection (which I like) and some other artifacts and natural history. Being a mask aficionado, I buy a mask replica of one of the fearsome gurus on the way out.

We then go to the local dzong, yet another former seat of royal government, prior to the other two. This is the smallest of the three we have visited, but attractive nonetheless. After many pictures, we walk through the heart of downtown Paro, easily the most interesting of the three large towns we have seen on this trip. It also has by far the best shopping, so we buy a lot of goodies there.

Towards evening, we go to our hotel, which overlooks the river in Paro. The Khankhu hotel is very similar to the hotel in Punakha and also has the best food.

* * *

On our final full day in Bhutan, we have an early departure to hike up to “The Tiger’s Nest,” the iconic destination in Bhutan. It is indeed spectacular, one of the top places to visit on the planet. We buy some basic walking sticks and start to hike up the mountain, trying to avoid the horse pucky that was deposited by the beasts of burden and that compete for space with us hikers. The trail would make a fabulous ski run.

After about 1.5 hours, we reach a cafeteria where we get slightly rejuvenated for the last trek up the mountain. There is another half hour of trail, which is followed by about a half hour of stone steps—first descending and then ascending—to the Tiger’s Nest, a significant Buddhist monastery—the Tatsang. It is more accurately many structures and temples, all built in the cliff. Wow.

Along the way is a very high waterfall that flows directly down the cliffs; yet more cliffs in which the temples are embedded; many Buddhist flag decorations; and lots of tourists. There is no way to do it justice in words, but we take a lot of pictures. One could stay overnight and visit the other structures in the cliffs as well as sleep on top of the mountain, but that would probably be overkill.

The climb down is not easy, partly because the altitude of about 3000m has made breathing difficult; partly because the steep incline has made walking down somewhat harder than going up; and partly because we are tired of walking for hours and our muscles ache. We make it nonetheless and are grateful for it.

After a quick shower at the hotel, we go for a 90-minute massage at another hotel, which really hits the spot. We end the evening with a dinner with the two Tsherings in a local restaurant in Paro. The food is OK, but authentic (and largely the same as everywhere else).

* * *

The final morning in Bhutan we get up early again and depart for the airport. It is just spitting distance in the valley below our hotel, but about 20 minutes by car due to the abysmal roads. We arrive there, only to find out that the flight had been rescheduled—already the previous month—for about 1.5 hours later. We try to buy the local whiskey in the duty-free store, only to find that they only stock Western booze. Shame on them!

On the airplane back to Delhi, we fly through Nepal and pass most of the Himalaya range. Spectacular! The weather is generally clear and we see many of the peaks, including Everest. What a great way to end a great trip to a great country!

CHINA

Chronicles of My First Visit to China
October 1992
by
P.F. Uhler

Day One

The first thing you notice flying into China at night in 1992 is the lack of lights. As I approach the outskirts of Shanghai, my first stop on my way to Beijing, it looks like a rural area in the United States, with intermittent lights and only occasional cars on the largest visible roads below.

I am sitting next to a Chinese man originally from Shanghai who now lives in Newark and who, as he proudly tells me, is soon getting his American citizenship. He tries to put a good face on the apparent lack of development, saying that we are quite far out of town. We soon make a 180 degree turn in the plane's approach, however, and the visual landscape doesn't change, despite the fact that over 12 million people live in the city. (What a difference even a decade can make!)

The Shanghai airport is modern, with people movers and escalators and all the other trappings of airport technology, about 15-years old. The custom service is mercifully perfunctory, at least for the western visitors, and we soon re-board for the trip to Beijing.

Another 1.5-hours later we arrive at the Beijing airport, which appears to be of 1960s vintage, but certainly more than adequate. I meet up with a professional colleague of mine, who chairs one of my committees at the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and who has come to present a paper at the CODATA Conference there, like myself.

We decide to share a cab. After some confusing haggling at a taxi counter, we get a verbal agreement for a ride to the hotel in the center of the city for 150 RMBs, or about \$28. This soon appears to be suspect, as we have to walk across an entire dark and empty parking lot to a traffic circle at the entrance to the airport. There, our driver indicates we should wait while he goes to get his car. He comes back shortly and loads us into his small Japanese sedan, apparently out of sight of the authorities. He does not turn on the meter. Only after we get to the hotel do we find out that the ride should have cost about 100 RMBs.

The road to the capital is straight and narrow, lined by two rows of trees and little else, at least near the airport. Occasionally, we pass some night construction that lights up the sky more brightly than the dull, low-intensity street lamps that cast an orange-hued pall upon the road. Our driver appears to be reasonably safe, electing not to pass when there are cars approaching (as opposed to some other places I have been or will go to). He does run some red lights at unfrequented intersections, however.

My companion, a world-renowned seismologist, tells me about his previous visit to Beijing. He had been invited to lecture about geophysics—a subject of earth shaking interest in this earthquake-prone land. Upon his arrival, he was informed that his lectures would last all day,

beginning at 8:00 the next morning. It was clear that the Chinese wanted to get their money's worth.

He tells me that in the 1970s, Chinese scientists had successfully predicted a temblor based on the aberrant behavior of animals and that they had evacuated a city of 100,000 with no loss of life. A few years later, a major quake hit the Beijing area, with an estimated loss of 250,000 people (the actual statistics are a state secret). The authorities demanded to know why this much bigger disaster could not have been predicted as well. Heads rolled. I wonder how earthquake-proof my high-rise hotel and meeting site would be. [Note: About 20 years later, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences told me that a colleague of hers had developed another way to predict earthquakes using satellite-based infrared sensors. Apparently, the earth surface heats up prior to an earthquake and this can be detected. I told her he should patent that process, but I don't know what happened.]

We leave the tree-lined road and enter more populated neighborhoods. In the outskirts, there are few people on the street, some sidewalk barbeques attracting a handful of diners on this Saturday evening. As we come closer to town, we get onto a larger boulevard that has much more activity (now it's all highways). Every third or fourth building houses a restaurant, most of which are draped with strings of yellow or multi-colored lights, looking a bit like the Long Island Expressway at Christmas time. Even closer to the city center, there are some modern-looking office and apartment buildings, giving the appearance of considerable pockets of wealth (now it's all been rebuilt and the overall wealth is palpable).

We arrive at the Beijing Hotel (yes, that is its real name and it was still there, refurbished, in 2014 which is the last time I was there) after a 40-minute ride. Our taxi driver, who hasn't said boo the entire time, bids us farewell in surprisingly good English.

The hotel lobby is ornate and cavernous, with little activity at that hour. I had paid a deposit for the Grand Beijing Hotel, which apparently is next door, but in which just as apparently I am not going to be staying. After a 3-hour journey, at midnight local time, I am not about to make a scene, especially since the hotel looks sumptuous. I go up to my room, which is quite luxurious as well. It has cherry wood furniture, a TV, radio console with digital clock, mini bar, and ample space. The bathroom is all marble, with modern fixtures and even a phone next to the john. Unfortunately, it appears to have the hygiene of a cheap hotel and one cannot drink the water (to this day you can't drink the water anywhere in China, and they always provide you with bottled water in the hotels). In any case, it will do for the week.

Day Two

I wake up early and it is cold. I have since come to learn that the heat is centrally controlled, and I mean centrally. Buildings cannot use heat until sometime in early November, by government order.

I flip on the TV and watch CNN Headline News from my warm bed. This is a channel that I'm sure is only available in hotels and residences that cater to Westerners.

On another channel there is a Chinese movie with Chinese and English subtitles, so I watch that for a while. It is a propaganda piece extolling the virtues of the hard-working, Marxist-Leninist, older generation. As the aging woman says, appropriately strolling through what appears to be a rock quarry, “They call me the Marxist granny, but I don’t know why I bother anymore. It will soon be time for me to retire.” Prescient thoughts. Communist dogma is a sham that none now believes, except as a prop for the one-party state. A few minutes later the conversation is in German, apparently between German and Chinese businessmen, so even the propaganda is no longer pure.

The (male) maid arrives at 9:00, so I leave Herr Schmidt and his new capitalist protégés, and head down to the lobby to try to get either a room upgrade or assurance that I will not be charged the higher rate for the hotel I had reserved. The latter option prevails, which means that I am paying less than \$70 per day for a room about 3 blocks from Tiananmen Square that would easily go for three times that in the U.S.

I turn on the television again in my room while unpacking. The first game of the World Series is on and already half-way through, so I decide to watch it some more. Mercifully, they cut out all the ads, so instead of obnoxious, higher decibel commercials between half-innings, there is just a picture of an empty field and the crowd, with some sporadic Chinese commentary. The next time you go to a big game, watch out: somebody in Beijing may be watching you. The amazing thing about it is that I see it live half-way around the world, giving at least some credence to the “World Series” moniker. In case you are wondering, the Braves went on to beat the Twins, 3 to 1, in that game.

I decide to go to one of the hotel restaurants before going out to explore the city. It’s a fancy Cantonese restaurant overrun by waitresses. They have such exotica as a very expensive shark fin soup, live sautéed eel, snake-head fish soup, and the like. I settle on more mundane choices of a cold-sliced honeyed pork appetizer, shrimp with cucumber, and shiitake mushrooms with crab, accompanied by green tea and draught Tsing Tao beer. It is good, but not particularly memorable.

My first foray into the city is uneventful. After a couple of hours of walking around I go back for a long nap. I get up in time for the conference reception, which is at 6:30. It turns out to be a buffet dinner, garnished with a string of obligatory welcoming and appreciation speeches which, not surprisingly, adorn at all such functions.

The food ranges from edible to horrid, the worst being some cold, sliced mystery meat that has an abominable oily taste that takes hours for the one taste to get out of my mouth. At the same time, it is quite clear that our Chinese hosts have gone to great lengths to put this on, and I hope they enjoy it. I sit with the current and former presidents of CODATA and at least have a decent conversation.

After dinner, I go out again for another walk, which turns out to be much more interesting. I am a lot more successful in finding potential restaurants and stores at which to shop. After walking down a long, dark residential avenue, I arrive at a street that’s well lit and lined by dozens of

food stalls selling mostly shish kebabs, fruits and vegetables, and a variety of very questionable stir fries and soups. At one stall is a stack of wilted bok choy sitting naked on the sidewalk.

The sidewalks are actually worthy of some description themselves. On the major boulevards there are double or even triple walkways bordering the streets. These are crowded, but are also usually tree-lined, with intermittent benches that are all occupied. There are quite a few street sweepers, armed with rudimentary brooms and white face masks. The sidewalks and streets are therefore free of litter, despite the throngs of humanity, and it provides some employment. However, the male pedestrians have an annoying habit of spitting whenever they feel like it and blowing their noses on the ground. The lack of trash thus suggests a deceptive level of cleanliness and the trip requires constant vigilance amid the bombs of phlegm.

At the same time, the air does not seem very polluted (certainly not like a quarter century hence!). It is probably due to a lack of traffic congestion and the time of year, before the coal-powered heating kicks in. The streets are filled with bicyclists who have no regard at all for traffic signals or anything else, the only saving grace being that most of them pedal in slow motion. (All these pedal pushers now own cars and the traffic they inspire is what I call chaos in slow motion.) Nonetheless, crossing a major road is an anarchic exercise of dodging the traffic. In an otherwise regimented, centralized society, where you might expect an opposite type of collective behavior, this must be an expression of individual rebellion.

Not surprisingly, the smaller avenues and streets are much more crowded, and full of more unusual sights and smells, especially in the evening. This brings me back to the street with the food stalls, which are actually on the street itself instead of on the sidewalk, with people walking in the middle of the street in front of the stalls, with all the bicyclists and occasional honking car whizzing past. Behind the stalls are stores and restaurants, some appearing to be ritzy by local standards. I check out a few for future reference.

The street narrows for a bit and is full of craft and clothing stores that provide entertaining window shopping—and some bargains. This soon gives way to more luxury hotels and “shopping malls” (now without the quotation marks), as I make my way back to the Beijing Hotel. I stop at a karaoke bar, which is apparently the local rage. They have a large, antiquated screen that has silent videos accompanying each song and singer, which are introduced with much fanfare by a female “D.J.”. Unfortunately, none of the handful of karaoke singers there can sing on key. I have a Beijing beer, which is actually better than Tsing Tao in my estimation, and talk with one of the waiters. He is most ingratiating, offering me an American cigarette, which I’m sure is a luxury item, but the conversation is not easy. It is loud and the language difficulties are prevalent. I use the john there, which is on par with a low-class bar in the West, even though the club itself is high-end and spotless—a pervasive problem, even today (in 2016).

I end up back in the hotel about two hours after I leave. I meet a couple of Frenchmen at the bar who are on tour and have a long conversation with them (in French). They want to know what Americans think of Mitterand and Chirac. I tell them that most Americans don’t know where France is, much less what its politics are...

Day Three

Today is the first day of the CODATA (Committee on Data for Science and Technology) conference. I will not bore you with the details, but I give the first paper after the plenary session in the morning. I then go to a Sichuan restaurant (my priorities!) at the hotel for lunch. I recall that I have some nicely flavored bok choy (the sidewalk scene can't get out of my head) and twice-cooked pork—definitely cooked for Western taste buds.

After attending several more presentations, I go for a long walk, retracing in part my steps from the previous night and then going much farther through residential neighborhoods with diverse local shops. A number of observations stand out. One is the extraordinary amount of construction going on throughout the city—whether it be high-rise apartment and office buildings, individual businesses and restaurants, and even roads. It indicates a great economic expansion, at least in this city, but one that has become well known and that I have seen throughout all of China on subsequent travels. It stands in stark contrast to the fading infrastructure in the USA and can be viewed as emblematic. I even come upon a Maxim's de Paris being built! Beijing clearly has arrived.

There is also a great deal of activity on the street: vendors hawking their wares; thousands of bicyclists, many with loads in tow; cooks by the hundreds setting up one-pot stands at lunch or dinnertime; pedestrians carrying loads of goods. Everyone is busy and, despite the lack of Western comforts and obvious material shortcomings, there are no derelicts or beggars to be seen, and probably very little crime. The people are industrious and resourceful, making the most of what they have and working hard to get what they do not. Indeed, the Chinese are known as entrepreneurs and rise to the top in most other societies, garnering both admiration and, in some cases, resentment. If the 19th century was British, and the 20th century American, it looks like the 21st will belong to the Chinese. Let us hope it will be a benign superpower.

One more side note. After hours of walking, I do not see a single pet, probably they are preferred on the dining room table. For instance, the hotel restaurant had “dog meat in spice” (as well as “ox head in jar”). The practice of serving dog meat in restaurants has been mostly eliminated by the turn of the century, at least from menus in English, and see my 2013 travelogue for the growing population of pets.

A Night at the Opera

That evening, I am loaded onto a bus and ferried along with my CODATA colleagues to a Beijing opera company performance in some hotel theater. I am in the land of Karl and Vladimir, but this opera could have been written by the Marx Brothers.

The show consists of very ornately dressed, highly stylized performers who sound like cats in heat. They are accompanied by a small band of oriental instruments. The theater is set up Vegas style, with tables served by waitresses. Alcoholic beverages are a definite plus for this show.

An electronic screen on the side of the stage provides the unnecessary, but nonetheless amusing, translations of the singing. There is a lot of conversation between the singing and dancing,

however, that is not translated and that is entertaining to the Chinese members of the audience. It nonetheless does not seem that we are missing very much, since the story line is very basic.

The first act is about a matchmaker in a small town and his conversation with young woman. The acting is very slapstick, bordering on The Three Stooges.

The next act is a dance number with seven women in elaborate costumes. “Don’t bother the green birds and let them meet on the branches in a dream,” they sing. A man enters. “I see the beautiful fairy on a wave.” More banter, sounding just like Topo Gigio. “Her looks is more beautiful than rosy dawn,” he gushes. “I marry her. It’s like a lotus flower on water, but I am afraid I am too close to her. Our hearts beat in harmony. We will never separate each other. I present you this pearl to symbolize love everlasting.” The pearl is the size of a golf ball. Maybe it is a golf ball. End of Act II.

Next, masked warriors with swords come out on stage, dancing to heavy percussion. A cat and mouse show up for no good reason. Everyone in the audience takes pictures. The dancers leave and the woman from Act II shows up again. More caterwauling.

A new set of dancers with blue flags comes on, quickly replaced by tumbling dancers. The warriors, cat and mouse, and some acrobats (named Li Ping, perhaps—I know a professor of earth sciences at George Mason University named Di Liping, so it’s not implausible!) enter briefly, but are soon replaced by a jousting couple. The cat and mouse mix it up and then the mouse takes on three warriors. And so it goes.

One of the dancers impersonates a drum majorette and drops her baton in the process. No pay for you! More flags and warriors. The drums continue to roll as the batons fly and twirl. The baton work gets trickier as the sticks are thrown and then kicked back. Soon the air is full of batons. Everyone is impressed and applauds.

The acrobats come back, followed in rapid succession by the warriors, the cat and mouse, and the flag people. There is a frenzy of beating drums. All the performers run off the stage and the curtain falls. The end.

Day Four

There are only a couple of short sessions scheduled at the conference that I want to attend, so I decide to go to the Forbidden City right by Tiananmen Square in the late morning. It is across from the Party Congress Hall, where the Chinese Communist Party concluded its big annual meeting earlier in the month. As always, it was touted as leading to big economic reforms. They have a different breed of party animals here than in the United States.

There is a huge mural of Mao over the entrance to the Forbidden City. I don’t know if there is any hidden significance in that, but it’s probably just straight-up propaganda. The gates of the Forbidden City are very high and imposing. The walls around the entire 200-acre compound are tall enough so that you can see nothing inside except some towers looming above. Although it had been sacked by the Japanese in WWII, it is still reputed to be fascinating, if only for the architecture, so I go inside with great expectations.

Unfortunately, my first impressions are rather disappointing. I go through a series of gates, which pass through massive walls. Between them are courtyards and interesting-looking buildings, but these are all roped off and entrance to the masses is forbidden, in keeping with the theme of the compound, unless you pay an entry fee. The initial main walkway is lined with store counters packed with tourist products, distastefully cheapening the experience. The emperors must be turning over in their graves. I take some pictures, buy the obligatory t-shirt, and leave because I have an early afternoon appointment with some Chinese aerospace officials.

Before going back to the hotel, however, I walk around Tiananmen Square part of the way and then take a rickshaw to a restaurant I saw earlier, the California Barbeque. It's a large operation, 4-stories high, and I settle on the second, most crowded, level. I am the only Westerner in sight. It takes some time getting service, but the food is even worse, the "barbequed" port being gritty, the vegetables greasy and poorly washed, and the beer warm and flat. I leave half of it and go to my meeting at the hotel.

My guests arrive about 20 minutes late. There is Mr. Qi, the executive director of the Institute of Space Law of the Chinese Society of Astronautics (I too am a member of the international Institute of Space Law and of the American Institute of aeronautics and Astronautics). I met Mr. Qi at an Orbital Debris Conference that I had helped organize earlier that year in Chicago. He is accompanied by Madame Yang, his deputy, and Mr. Xue, a reporter from Aerospace China magazine, who acts as interpreter. Mr. Xue brings a couple of recent glossy publications on the Chinese space program and we spend about an hour exchanging information about our respective activities. At the end of the meeting, I ask them for some suggestions for good local restaurants and they write down four names.

About a half hour after they leave, Mr. Xue reappears and asks me if I would like to accompany them to a traditional restaurant on the outskirts of town. He says they would drive me around the city first and of course I am delighted by the offer. We see a lot of Beijing, which has many newly built sections with high rises and many new ones on the way.

The meal we have is sumptuous by local standards, although there are a few questionable dishes. We begin with four cold appetizers—chicken with bean sauce, kelp and green onion with soy sauce, cucumber with ginger, and sliced pork lung with celery (which I pass on, but which I come to learn is a main ingredient of some pork dim sum). Next, we have sweet soy bean cakes. Then come scallops in brown sauce, large prawns in their shell, fried fish pieces, sesame buns with something like hamburger meat (ha ha), four different steamed buns and cakes, Chinese cabbage with mushrooms, steamed rice, and finally some nondescript soup. This is accompanied by 5-star beer and some sort of Chinese schnapps, of which they order a half-liter bottle and which they keep pouring in little shot glasses. It is a most convivial repast, despite the language barriers, greased to a large extent by the booze.

Day Five

After going to a few morning presentations, I go out of town on a tour of the Great Wall, and the Ding Ling and Ming tombs. The Western tourists are crammed into a small, ancient mini-bus designed for local bodies, and we head out. It is not at all pleasant. The bus has no shock

absorbers and it literally bounces down the highway at 40km/hour. After about 2.5 hours, which includes the obligatory half-hour shopping stop where no one buys anything, we arrive at the tomb sites. This turns out to be more interesting than expected.

The only thing I will note was the proliferation of rabid vendors everywhere that would not leave us alone. They all have the same merchandize and the same goals, which makes it that much more annoying. They obviously have not given much thought to customer relations, having only been authorized to set up shop in the past few years, I presume.

Several of us decide to skip lunch in order to see more of the area, so I have some Ritz crackers and bottled water. This is actually an improvement on the morning's fare, when I ordered a couple of croissants and coffee at the hotel. The croissants were steamed, soggy, and made with some awful fat instead of butter. They were dégoûtant, even slathered with strawberry jam, so I only ate part of one.

We next bounce our way to the Great Wall, which is, well, great. It is indeed extraordinary, despite the poor weather and visibility, and the fact that the Wall in that location has been repaired and built up for the tourists. I take many pictures and buy even more (I now need to find them). It is one of the planet's man-made wonders.

We return to Beijing late—too late to take the arranged bus to the conference banquet—so we get a ride from our tour bus. I still have a bad taste in my mouth from the mystery meat at the reception three days before, so I am somewhat apprehensive about this banquet, even though we have paid \$30 for it. As it turns out, the \$30 must have been subsidizing all the Chinese participants, since I would judge from the quality of the food that it is a \$10 per person type of meal. Max.

The only thing I remember is a very strange soup in a bamboo cup that looks like it is all grease, with a blob of some grey matter floating in the middle. I do not eat that, or even taste it, but I notice that all of the Chinese gobble it up. In almost all of my subsequent travels in China, the soups are the thing to avoid most consistently. Nonetheless, it is an enjoyable time and our hosts from the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) are very gracious and friendly.

Day Six

The conference is over and CODATA has its biennial General Assembly, so I have a free day, although as these notes have indicated I haven't worked too hard in the previous days either. It is a shopping day and I also have a meeting at the Institute for Remote Sensing Applications (IRSA).

I buy some post cards to commemorate my first trip to China with my friends and relations, and then head out to some stores where I window shopped earlier. I buy a couple of rabbit fur hats with ear flaps to keep Alex and me warm skiing for \$8 each, and a few other gifts. On the way back, I run into Richard Garwin, a renowned physicist who is a member of the Space Studies Board where I worked until recently. He is one of the very few people—perhaps the only one—who is a Member of all three National Academies in the U.S. He is also a member of a U.S.

bilateral nuclear disarmament committee, visiting the Chinese establishment. It is truly a small world.

I head over to IRSA, where I have some discussions about remote sensing policy and practice. The Chinese are big users of our Landsat data (they still are, as of 2016) and I am given a glossy, ~2 x 3 foot Landsat composite map of all of China. Very cool.

We have lunch in the IRSA executive dining room with the senior staff. The food is Szechuan-style and the best I have the entire trip. In fact, as I come to learn on all my subsequent travels in China and document in my travelogues, the executive dining rooms in the various government institutes in Beijing are the best places to eat (and certainly the cheapest ;-).

That evening, I go to one of the restaurants recommended by the space law people. It's attractive enough and we order a pretty expensive Peking duck, for which we wait a long time. When it finally comes out, we are hungry but we each get about 3 or 4 bites of crispy skin, with the remainder of the carcass taken away, no doubt to be eaten by the staff. Very disappointing. Fortunately, I have eaten a flock of Peking ducks on my subsequent visits to that city.

I should digress at this point and note that I had a number of stimulating conversations, including surprisingly very frank political discussions concerning our respective countries. One of my Chinese colleagues, who shall remain nameless, offered a very gloomy assessment of the Tiananmen fiasco of 1989. I was quite blown away, especially since it was not what you would expect in that regime!

I fly home the next day, after a very memorable first trip to Beijing. Little do I know that China will become my most frequent and favorite destination on the planet in the coming decades.

**Notes from China: An Occidental Tourist
December 2000**

by
P.F. Uhler

Hohhot

Day One

I arrived in Beijing after a 12-hour flight from San Francisco feeling great. I had been able to stretch out over an entire middle row of a Boeing 777 and sleep for about eight hours. The Beijing airport has been renovated since my first trip there in 1992 and it is now a first-class facility.

After a three-hour layover with no hassles, I got on my China Air flight to Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The flight itself left and arrived 20 minutes earlier than scheduled, and although the flight was only about 45 minutes, the stewardesses were able to serve drinks and a snack twice. Perhaps we should import a few to the U.S.

Because we arrived so soon and the baggage was unloaded almost immediately, my driver and guide were not yet at the airport to meet me. Needless to say, this caused me some consternation, since I was wondering whether all my local arrangements would work in similar fashion.

Fortunately, my hotel had a counter at the airport entrance and through a variety of gestures and useless English phrases I was able to convey to the attendant that I was staying at his establishment. He put me on a shuttle van with some other people and we left almost immediately.

The Pearl Hotel is a modern high rise in the center of Hohhot, a regional industrial city of about 1.5 million people. The hotel is rated with 3-stars, but it could easily get away with a 4-star rating in light of all the amenities and appointments, equivalent to many European 4-star hotels I have stayed in. It has a restaurant, shops, two bars, dancing hall, karaoke club, business center, sauna and massage, gym, and more. My room was very comfortably and attractively furnished, including cable TV with HBO (but no CNN), a minibar, and two phones. It is one of four similarly rated hotels in the city. Later, I was to find out that there is one 4-star hotel, and that a 5-star is under construction. Based on my lowly 3-star experience, the others must be opulent.

My driver and guide arrived at the hotel as I was checking in. The guide, Han Hua, was a young woman who spoke good English. The driver, an affable middle-aged man named Zheng, spoke only Mongolian and Chinese.

They were most apologetic about missing me at the airport. We talked about the itinerary for the next 3 days. Han Hua tried to discourage me from spending the night in the "ordinary yurt" in the grasslands. She said that it was not a good season for it and that it would be better to come back to Hohhot the same afternoon. I was interested in seeing Genghis Khan's mausoleum and suggested that we might be able to fit that in instead of the night in the yurt. Unfortunately,

Genghis Khan's vaunted remains are located 400 km southwest of Hohhot, so this would have been a very time-consuming and cut too much into seeing other local attractions. I opted instead to spend the extra time locally.

After unpacking, I decided to go out for a walk, since I was well rested from my travels. The view from my 8th floor window revealed a nighttime scene of a large, modern city with large office buildings, neon lights, and elevated highways. I bundled up and went out. It was below freezing, but there was only a faint breeze so that it was not unpleasant. Most of the cars on the road were taxis. There were quite a few bicyclists, which is still the dominant form of transport. What surprised me most was the number of stores that were open after 11 pm – groceries, corner kiosks, and larger stores with appliances, furniture, and clothing. Even a bridal shop. It seemed to indicate a measure of economic vibrancy, even if it was just the city center. The largest and most attractive building I saw was the regional Mongolian state tobacco monopoly. Unwisely, perhaps, I walked down some unlit and largely deserted residential side streets near the main boulevards, but no disaster struck. The next day, my guide would warn me not to do that, although when I pressed her further, she did not think that the crime rate was particularly bad. I suspect she was more concerned about losing a Yankee customer.

Day Two

The next morning, after only 3 hours of sleep, I went for a nice dim sum breakfast. This included several varieties of the traditional Chinese sweet rolls, some julienned pickled root vegetables, a couple pot stickers, and green tea. The pot stickers were some of the best I have had, although they were filled with the same kind of ground mystery meat as everywhere else. I know that if I could find out the nature of the flesh (pork lungs was one ingredient I recall from some place in the U.S.), I wouldn't have put them in my mouth.

After breakfast, I waited in the hotel lobby for my guide and driver. I picked up an English version of the Beijing China Daily. The paper was surprisingly informative, with lots of national and international news, apparently from various (uncredited) news wire services and devoid of overt propaganda. Among the more interesting tidbits I learned was that Chinese basic research was beginning to place a high priority on nanotechnology (a fact that was later borne out by the vice president of Peking University), and that Vietnam had cancelled its barbecued rat festival this year because heavy rains had drowned most of the excess rodent population. One letter by a foreign Beijing resident lamented the rude and selfish nature of drivers in the capital, and that they would need to clean up their act if Beijing is to get the 2008 summer Olympics. Idle threat. Another letter was critical of government inaction concerning the environmental degradation of the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. This I would be seeing first hand in a couple of hours. The letter noted that a severe drought was causing widespread desertification of the grassy regions, that the water table was under great pressure, and that the government was not doing enough to prevent overgrazing or to plant trees. As I was to learn later in Beijing, the capital already experienced four sandstorms last spring from nearby desertified areas. A locust infestation during the summer, which I had already read about on the Internet prior to arriving, had apparently intensified these problems.

Han Hua and Zheng soon arrived, along with a Mr. Liu, who turned out to be our host for lunch, and we set off for the Xilamuren (“Yellow River,” in Mongolian) grasslands. The part of the city I saw that day was considerably less attractive than what I had seen the previous night. Although not oppressively depressing, it was drab, dingy, and lacked any noticeable cultural identity. Most of it appeared to have been built since the 1949 “liberation,” as Han Hua called it, so it smacked of the socialist realism style that pervades all the commie states of the latter half of the 20th century.

The most remarkable feature was the abominable smog, which cast a nearly opaque pall over the grimy scenery, blocking out the sun. My guide asked me if we had this kind of pollution in my country. I told her that we used to, but that this had been cleaned up substantially in recent decades through environmental regulations, technological countermeasures, and a changing economy. I said that it looked to me like they might reach a point like the killer fogs in London after WWII and that then there might be enough political pressure to do something about it. She shrugged and said that the government is trying to switch to renewable or cleaner energy sources, but that coal was cheap and the people poor.

The smog began to lift soon after we got to the city outskirts, unveiling a landscape of dry, rugged mountains, devoid of almost any vegetation. They were reminiscent of the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada foothills. We climbed steadily uphill on hairpin curves for about a half hour, passing by the grace of God a string of very slow moving or stalled trucks which were all saddled with groaning loads of the coal that is choking the people in the valley below.

Once we got over the crest we descended briefly to a high plateau, which forms the southern boundary of this portion of the grasslands area. From there, we drove about another 45 minutes northeast to the Xilamuren grasslands areas. It was all quite desolate and barren, covered in the late fall by a stubbly, brown grass. Occasional rows of shallow pits dotted the landscape, dug by the government in anticipation of tree plantings in the spring. This struck me as an optimistic project of a centralized bureaucracy. Herds of sheep could be seen from time to time grazing on the meager fodder between the little hamlets that we passed through.

We arrived at the Xilamuren tourist trap in the late morning. The sky was clear and a strong wind was blowing, making the air feel like it was below zero. Han Hua and I walked around for some time through the campgrounds, which consisted of several dozen “deluxe” and “ordinary” yurts, and several communal buildings. A yurt was deluxe by virtue of having a wood-burning stove, two small beds, and a bathroom with unknown appliances. The ordinary yurt simply had the stove. Both yurts were constructed with a wooden frame which, in the deluxe model, was covered with some plaster and in the ordinary version, had some canvass cover with lamb's wool insulation underneath. The outhouse used by the denizens of ordinary yurts was a cement platform with five squat holes divided by short, low concrete walls. The outhouse stank despite the freezing temperatures, and I managed to refrain from exposing my refined American derriere to this dark hole of sorrow. As I would later find out, every public restroom in Inner Mongolia consists only of squat holes, even if encased in marble in a 4-star hotel. This might actually be a blessing in disguise, since the toilets most likely would never be washed.... I silently thanked my guide for talking me out of spending the night there.

We then left the campgrounds and went to the only other interesting place there, a +300-year-old Tibetan Buddhist monastery, known as a Lamasery. It was closed, but we got an old monk to open it up for a \$0.25 entry fee. He let us into the main temple and went to the altar in the back room, where he began lighting candles and incense. He then sat down to chant, occasionally punctuating that by ringing a small brass bell. The front room was decorated elaborately and colorfully. It had a central ceremonial area that was fenced off by a low barrier on all sides. In the middle were some mats and pillows and other religious objects. We walked clockwise to the back room, where the monk had already initiated his ritual.

Along the rear wall of the Lamasery were three large wooden, carved Buddhas. The one on the left represented the past, the one in the middle, the present, and the one on the right, where the monk was, the future. In a place like this, one might think that being on the left side would be more appropriate, but then again, the right side may be all there is. Certainly the middle held no attraction, despite being framed by two carved serpents. The entire area was decorated with religious relics and paintings. An old photograph of what appeared to be the young Dalai Lama was next to the central altar. It was not clear to me whether this was the state-sponsored “official” Dalai Lama, or the authentic one, but I assumed the latter, given the aged quality of the print and frame. I lit several sticks of incense and donated some more money in the collection box. The smell of the incense, combined with the chanting, the cold semi-dark room, and the exotic decor produced an almost transcendental experience, transporting me to another time and place, and I savored the moment for some time. I was reluctant to leave.

We made our way back down the main (and only) street to the Liu's little restaurant, where I was the guest of honor that day. Mr. Liu, a most gregarious man who spoke no English, asked through my translator whether I wanted to wear the traditional garb, which I accepted. We went into the small dining area, which had three large tables. The appetizers were already awaiting us – pickled, julienned carrots and some white root vegetable, roasted peanuts, sliced hard-boiled egg, and mutton head cheese. The latter item looked suspiciously like some hideous cold cuts I had eaten at a banquet in Beijing in 1992, and which undeniably had been the most repulsive thing I ever had the misfortune of putting in my mouth. I resolved not to eat it.

Our rather inauspicious starters were soon followed by a seemingly endless procession of hot dishes, prepared and brought out by a beaming Mrs. Liu. The putative piece de resistance was “finger mutton,” the local specialty, which is plain roast sheep meat, coarsely hacked up into pieces of different sizes and shapes, and served with a black bean dipping sauce that managed to rescue it. The other heaping platefuls of food consisted of – you guessed it – mutton in various other incarnations, including stir-fried mutton with celery, a spicy black-peppered mutton stir-fried with onions, and a mutton soup with a very greasy clear broth that had just a little Chinese parsley and little bits of vegetables floating on top. Other dishes included a plain omelet, sauteed canned sliced mushrooms, some stir-fried vegetables, steamed bread, and steamed rice. I ate everything and the soup too, which my guide asked with some incredulity whether I liked. It actually wasn't too bad in small quantities and no worse than most of the soups I would eat on the rest of my trip.

The meal was served with hot tea and little bottomless cupfuls of “wine.” I assumed the latter was something like sake, for it had a similar flavor, but the bottle had an improbable 43% written

on it. After some discussion and dictionary research, I was told that it was a local sorghum liquor. After drinking about half a liter between the four of us (including the driver) we were all feeling happy. Since I received the lion's share of the booze, I even summoned up some faux courage to try the mutton head cheese. This turned out to be not too different from the Czech pork head cheese (tlacenka); that is, both to be avoided under perfectly sober and rational circumstances.

Toward the end of the feast, Mr. Liu announced that it was local custom for the host to sing a traditional song. He chose one aptly titled "Xilamuren Grasslands," which he sang with great gusto and feeling. He then gave me a silver cup full of the sorghum liquor, which I understood I was to chug. I was told to say "Ganbei!" which they told me meant "cheers." Thus fortified, I was asked to sing a traditional song from my own country. So I sang "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," which was all I could think of on the spur of the alcohol-laden moment, with equally great gusto and feeling and to everyone's great amusement. In retrospect, I should have sung "Home on the Range," as the American equivalent to Mr. Liu's song. Had we stayed any longer, I would have launched into my repertoire of ribald Czech folk songs, but we got ready to leave instead. Maybe a third time.

After a final encounter with the dreaded outhouse, we headed out to visit a herdsman family in the open grasslands. We drove for some 15 minutes on a series of dirt roads over the barren plains, past several outposts, until we arrived at the final one. It looked like all the others, except that it had three yurt frames standing off to the side. These would be covered in the temperate months to house unfortunate visitors. Two vicious dogs were chained on a short leash in the front yard. On the other side of the house were several large mounds of dried dung that was used as fuel for the wood stoves inside. In the back was a pile of many dozens of empty sorghum liquor bottles. Off in the distance was a herd of sheep. Otherwise, all one could see was shallow snow drifts on the wind-swept plains. We went inside.

Our host family was a middle-aged couple and the mother of one of them, who had a deeply creased, dark brown, weather-beaten face. She-chain smoked the entire time. The house had four small rooms-the front living room with some chairs and a sofa, two bedrooms, and a kitchen and bath. I was ushered into the master bedroom, where I was seated on an elevated platform that served as their bed and that was heated from underneath-by a pipe from the dung stove. I sat at a little wooden table, cross legged. The food consisted of two kinds of hard, fried or baked milk curd, small biscuits, millet seed, butter, sugar, and a tea with sheep milk. I was told that this is what they typically ate for breakfast, sometime with some finger mutton dipped in the milk tea. I tried a little of everything and didn't enjoy any of it. I spent the rest of my visit trying to load an exposed roll of film (no, it was not readily apparent) into the new camera, with everyone trying to help. I was lucky not to break it.

We left as soon as possible for our last stop on the grasslands, Aobao Hill, where the herdsmen go to pray to the heavens. They have a lot to pray for. We drove over the hard-packed soil of the prairie following some tire tracks in the patches of frozen snow. There was hardly any road to speak of. On the way, I realized that I had either lost or forgotten the roll of film with the pictures I had taken that day. I searched all my pockets and belongings three times to no avail. I was

distraught over this. We decided that we would return to the family after our stop on the hill to see if I had left the film roll in their house or dropped it somewhere.

Aobao Hill is not very elevated, but nonetheless is the highest point in the surrounding area. The herdsmen have built a prayer mound with a pile of rocks and some ornaments. I was told to pick up a rock and walk clockwise around the mound three times while reciting my prayer, and then to place my rock on the mound to send my prayer to the heavens. The wind had really picked up and the wind chill was ferocious. I performed the little ceremony, praying that my film would be found. As we got in the car, I reached in my coat pocket, which I had searched through multiple times and, lo and behold, there was my film!

I slept most of the way back to Hohhot, the jet lag, sorghum liquor, and frigid air all having caught up with me. That evening, we went to a very nice restaurant, run by Zheng' s sister and brother-in-law, and located next to the 4-star hotel.

Day Three

The next morning, a Saturday, was much brighter than the previous one. I could actually see the sun and some blue sky through the carbon haze. We started off at 9:00 am and went to Zhaojun's monument. Zhaojun is considered to be one of the four beautiful women in Chinese antiquity. She was a concubine “princess” of the Han emperor, in the area south of the Great Wall, around 30 B.C. She volunteered to become the concubine of the tribe in the Hohhot region, which was hostile to the Han dynasty. As a result of this act, peace broke out for several decades between the two tribes, and Zhaojun has been revered in northern China ever since. The hill where her monument was erected (but not where she was actually buried) was formed by all the adoring peasants who traveled great distances carrying soil to build it up. On the way back, I had a photo op with a camel.

The next stop was in “old town” Hohhot, which dates back several centuries. We went to the Dazhao Lamasery, the largest in the whole region. This was a very impressive compound with eight temples and other residential buildings for both monks and students. We visited several of the temples and took a lot of pictures outside. We then walked through part of the old town. My photographs captured some of the visual aspects of the Lamasery and the surrounding neighborhood, but the sounds and smells made it truly memorable, especially inside the temples. Unlike my experiences in some other developing countries, the people on the street did not badger me with unwanted solicitations, so that the walk outside was not only interesting but enjoyable.

Our last visit before lunch was the Five Pagoda Temple. Built in the 1730s, it houses a couple ancient Mongolian astronomical charts chiseled in stone. There was a very nice shop adjacent to this place, where I bought some nice gifts and a bunch of postcards. Lunch was at the same place we had dinner the night before, and it was again very good.

Unlike the depressing morning drive the previous day through the drab northern part of the city, cruising around the other parts of town on this day revealed a much more cosmopolitan place. There was a tremendous amount of activity everywhere, lots of new construction with very

attractive designs, and many well-stocked stores. I was much more favorably impressed than the day before and really enjoyed the tour.

The final cultural stop after lunch was at the White Pagoda Temple, an ornate, 7-story wooden structure built in the 1100s. This was in the eastern outskirts of the city, towards the airport, where most of the new development is taking place. It was quite obvious that a lot of investment was going into it and that considerable wealth was being generated. We passed a school building that looked like it would be the envy of any U.S. school district (minus the squat holes). Nearby was a gated community with modern, spacious villas “for millionaires,” as Han Hua put it. I didn't get into a Marxist dialogue about it with her, but capitalism, it seems, has arrived in Hohhot.

We ended the afternoon with some shopping near the main square. We went into a sporting goods store that was stocked with all kinds of name-brand sporting equipment and accessories, just like in some suburban U.S. mall. Next door was a place selling cellular phones and other electronics. Various U.S. and European logos were displayed on other buildings. We went a little further down the street to a tourist store with very expensive cashmere clothing on the first floor, and high-quality folk art on the second, where I bought a bunch of gifts.

Dinner that night was in a different, lower-level hotel. The food was good, but not as good as at the previous restaurant. For some reason, they had the front lobby door open and there was a sub-zero arctic draft that made the meal memorable for the wrong reason. After dinner we went to the 4-star hotel and to the adjacent modern recreational center, which had an indoor pool, bowling, indoor golf, a children's play area, and other amusements. We bowled a couple of games and then I went back to the hotel.

Day Four

Instead of the Chinese breakfast this morning, I had a “Western” breakfast. This consisted of mostly the same dim sum items, except that I also got a fried egg and a cup of very good coffee. Eating a fried egg with chop sticks is not my idea of fun first thing in the morning. The songs on the sound track were the same each day – “Hotel California” by the Eagles, 60s R&B, and 90s pop. American culture without the royalties.

After checking out of the hotel, I was taken to the Inner Mongolian Museum of Culture and Natural History. The museum has four wings. The first one we went through was a natural history/paleontology exhibit, mostly presenting fossils found in the region. The exhibits were mostly pretty uninteresting, until we reached the last room, which contained a fully reconstructed brontosaurus, or some such large saurus, which measured 26 m long and 14 m high. The other wing on the first floor had an exhibit about “minority” (i.e., not Chinese) people of Mongolia, the various tribes in the different regions. One northwest group lives in tipis.

On the second floor were exhibits about the communist revolution in Inner Mongolia in one wing, and on the other side about the region's earlier history, including of course Genghis Khan and his son, Kublai, in the 13th century. Back when Mongol hordes were Mongol hordes.

We went to a different restaurant for lunch, but it was full with a couple birthday parties (a popular pastime there on Sunday afternoons), so we went to another place. However, Han Hua found this to lack the appropriate “atmosphere,” so we ended up at Zheng's sister's place again, which was a good idea. There we had another feast with more traditional local dishes.

These included fried mutton ribs with a dry spice dip, mutton shanks in broth in a hot pot, beef gristle in an oily red sauce also in a hot pot, mixed stir fried vegetables, some kind of oat noodles that were first steamed and then stir fried with green onions and a little soy sauce, broccoli and shiitake mushrooms stir fried, jasmine tea, and Niulanshan, an even more potent type of sorghum liquor (56%) than we had out on the Xilamuren grasslands. It was a huge and greasy meal that was both exotic and quite good. The waitress tried to serve us a soup at the end, which we sent back.

In the afternoon we did some more sightseeing in both the old town business district and the new. We went into several new department stores and did some window shopping, but the stores didn't take any foreign credit cards, so I didn't buy anything more. Less than four hours after the huge lunch we went to an early dinner, since I had to get to the airport by 6:30. We went back to the drafty restaurant, which was not as cold this time, and got some steamed dumplings (jiao-zi) filled with more tasty mystery meat, and two sauteed vegetable dishes. The dumplings are a traditional dish to serve to someone who is going away. Since we were in a hurry and no one was hungry, the driver took the leftovers home in styrofoam doggie bags.

We bid adieu at the airport, after they negotiated me through check in, where I had to pay a surcharge for excess baggage weight (I was lucky they weren't weighing me at that point!). I rewarded both Han Hua and Zheng with a nice tip and some small gifts I brought from the U.S., and thanked them profusely for their wonderful tour, which was truly memorable.

Beijing

Days Five and Six

It was time to do some business in Beijing. I met my U.S. delegation in the Friendship Hotel lobby each morning, where we were picked up at 8:30 for our meetings at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. We were there for the second U.S.-China Bilateral Symposium on Selected S&T Database Activities (no, not Los Alamos nuclear data). The first symposium was held in Washington in March in conjunction with a conference on Data for Science and Society, that I had organized, and this was the reciprocal visit.

The presentations by the Chinese were quite interesting. We heard about Sustainable Development Information Networks, Data Integration for Supporting Modeling and Virtual Natural Resources and Environment in China, Traditional Chinese Medicine Databases and Related Software, The Chinese Biodiversity System, The Digital Library of Beijing University, Popular Science Web Sites and Virtual Museums, and The Reliability of Natural Information Extracted from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) Official Records. I spoke about Intellectual Property Rights in Digital Information in the Developing World Context. We had a full day of meetings on the first day, with a working lunch that was catered to the meeting room by Domino's Pizza. For all our other meals we went to humongous banquets.

On Tuesday afternoon we ended around 2:30 and then went for a site visit to the Institute of Remote Sensing Applications. I had been to the old building 8 years earlier and recalled having the best meal of my trip there. The new facility was much nicer and better equipped. The former deputy director, Prof. Guo, who had treated me to lunch on my previous visit, was now the director. He said he hoped that Gore would win the election because Gore was a big supporter of the Digital Earth project, which Guo wanted to continue and participate in.

That evening, we were taken to the Lao She Tea House for “Beijing Opera,” which was really a variety show more like the Grand Ol’ Opry. There was slapstick comedy, a Chinese rap artist, a contortionist, and a traditional theatrical pantomime. This was quite interesting and amusing – much more so than the Beijing Opera I had gone to on my first trip, in which the singing sounded like cats in heat.

Day Seven

In the morning we toured the Imperial Summer Palace. This is a truly spectacular place, and one I had missed on my previous visit. Following that tour we ate lunch on our own at the hotel. We were told we could eat for free at the “Western” restaurant, which had mediocre food, and where we had our “banquet” the first night as well as all our breakfasts. I decided to pass up this freebie and went by myself to one of the hotel's fancy Chinese restaurants to see what I might find. The following items were on the menu, which I could have ordered a la carte for a complete meal:

<i>Appetizer</i>	duck's tongue in peppercorn chili sauce
<i>Entrée</i>	soyed pig's large intestine
<i>Soup</i>	preserved vegetable and pig's bladder soup
<i>Dessert</i>	double boiled snow frog with red dates and lotus seeds

Instead, I settled for barbecued roast suckling pig, stir fried beans and onion, and a hot and sour soup. The roast pork was half pork rind and had enough cholesterol to give a horse a heart attack, but it was quite tasty as were the vegetables. I had a Beijing Beer with it and the main course hit the spot. The soup stock, however, had a very strange odor, like old shoe leather. I made the mistake of eating about half of it and then had a rancid aftertaste of it for the rest of the day.

In the afternoon we went to Tiananmen Square and the front courtyard of the Imperial Forbidden City. I had been to both places on my previous trip, so this was not as interesting to me. The one change I detected was the Starbuck's Coffee shop in the Forbidden City, which apparently was quite controversial because it had an ostentatious sign on the front that many Chinese quite rightly resented. But I bet the emperor never had an iced double mocha latte with hazelnut biscotti.

We then went to the main shopping street in the midtown area near the Square. This was recently rebuilt with new stores and a pedestrian zone closed to traffic. It is located around the corner from the Beijing Hotel, where I had stayed in 1992. The stores were very impressive, both in terms of their design and construction, as well as the stocked merchandise. We did most of our shopping in a 5-story store that had primarily arts and crafts items. I bought several gifts there, including a wood mask for myself from South China made by the Miao people.

For dinner we went to a famous Peking duck restaurant that is the flagship joint for a chain of 60 such places throughout China. You could watch the ducks slow roasting, head hung low, and pick all the other dinner items from a refrigerated case to be cooked to order. We went for several safe looking dishes, including mixed vegetables and Sichuan shrimp. Our guide, whose name meant “Green Willow,” was a very sweet, bright, and petite-girl in her early twenties who had just come from college in Sichuan province 3-months earlier to work at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. When she spoke Chinese she sounded like the ferret in the Budweiser commercial. Green Willow chose one more dish with green celery and some bits of meat that looked like raw chicken, but turned out to be duck tongues. I ate half of one, a small bite which was more than enough. The Peking duck was perfectly roasted, head and all, but unseasoned. We wrapped the carved duck pieces in the traditional tortilla-like pancakes, together with-the hoisin sauce and the shredded green onion, but it would have been a lot better if the duck had been seasoned, or at least salted. We also got some duck soup – made by a different bunch of Marx brothers – that was quite bad, tasting like very strong, unthickened duck gravy. I could only handle one sip of it. After I finished this feast, however, I could still taste the hot and sour soup from lunch on my breath.

Day Eight

This was another full day of meetings, with the morning spent at Peking University. The campus is an impressive mixture of old and new. We visited their Center for Bioinformatics, the Institute of Remote Sensing and GIS, and a new \$10M library, which has 4.7M volumes, including many ancient manuscripts as well as a big collection of digitized documents. We had lunch with the VP of the University and the food there was the best of the whole trip. He told us that the University has cooperative agreements with many U.S. companies, including Intel, Motorola, Bell Labs, IBM, and Microsoft, among others).

After lunch we went on an impromptu visit to the Law School's Intellectual Property Department, where I met the associate dean, who is a graduate of Yale Law School and teaches cyberlaw. He has formed a company that is digitizing and translating into English all the nation's official legal documents. Yahoo has rated their Web site the #3 site in China. Another impressive activity.

We ended the day with a visit to the Institute of Geography and Natural Resources' Global Change Information and Research Center. They have compiled an online database with 5000 geographic, environmental, and socioeconomic parameters, many of which are translated into English. They have archived over 1 terabyte of data on CD-ROMs and are looking for a cooperative partner in the U.S. The director is a very savvy and energetic woman who spent several years at a NASA-funded data center in the U.S.

Day Nine

We went on more site visits on Friday morning to the Center for Chinese Ecosystem Research and to the State Key Lab of Resources and Environmental Information System. We then were invited to our final official banquet at the same local restaurant at which we had dinner the night

before. By now the food and meetings were a blur and I was feeling like one of the greasy stuffed dishes that we were consuming in mass quantities. I had perpetual heartburn, although it didn't keep me from stuffing my face. It was a damn good thing that this wasn't a really long trip. One of the lunch dishes, served in an oblong bamboo bowl, was advertised as chicken, but it was some other small mammal, based on its different bone structure. My best guess was that it was some kind of rodent and even though it didn't taste bad, I only ate a couple pieces.

In the afternoon Green Willow and another conference organizer took us to the Chinese National Science and Technology Museum. The new annex was opened in April 2000, and already they had had over a million visitors. A geodesic dome next door housed an Imax theatre. We were greeted by the museum director and some staff, including a Mr. Ou, who spoke excellent English and who subsequently served as our tour guide. We were informed that part of their ancient S&T exhibit, which we were about to see, would go on a North American tour next year, beginning in Vancouver, B.C.

The entire museum was first class. By far the most interesting and beautifully curated and displayed exhibit was of the ancient Chinese technologies. The Chinese were the first to invent and produce many technologies – often several centuries ahead of Europe. Early Chinese inventions that we saw included: a seismograph, astronomical observatory, compass, gunpowder and small rockets, metal casting, paper, printing press, ceramics, and thousands of traditional medicines and medical procedures (e.g., acupuncture). I had a picture taken of me next to a metal sculpture of a human body used for acupuncture training. The sculpture had hundreds of holes that would be sealed up with wax and the cavities in back filled with water. If the student stuck the needle in the wrong hole, the water would squirt out. I also took a picture of a seismograph, which was a large metal vessel surrounded by toads with open mouths. An earthquake would be registered by releasing water into the mouth of one or more toads, depending on the severity of the tremor and the direction from which it came.

Particularly notable were the silk screen appliques, which were on almost transparent framed screens and which were some of the most beautiful art objects I have ever seen anywhere. These would depict one scene from one side and a different scene from the other, all exquisite.

The rest of the museum was filled with hands-on displays of modern S&T inventions, very much like the science museums I have seen in Boston or San Francisco. The place was overrun by hordes of delighted kids.

That evening I watched part of the Bush-Gore post-election circus on CNN and then sent some e-mails from the well-equipped hotel business center. I had a late dinner of pepper steak, pommes frites, and broccoli for a change of pace. The meal was much better than I expected. The best part was some native red Dynasty wine, which tasted like a very good light Italian wine. This was perhaps the biggest (positive) culinary surprise of the whole trip.

Day Ten

On the morning of my last day I took it easy. I watched some more political theatrics on CNN and packed. I then went out for a walk before lunch in the immediate neighborhood, which was

in north-central Beijing. Across the street a 30-story “Cybertower” being built. There are 20 and 30-story skyscrapers popping up like mushrooms all over town, showing tremendous amounts of investment. The city does not have the appearance of a developing country, except for all the bicycles commingling with the traffic. The traffic itself is chaos in slow motion, with vehicles coming in all directions at every intersection. The guiding rule is that might makes right, with the buses typically going the fastest and barreling through all the other vehicles. This is the guiding philosophy of the ruling Party and most likely will be the rule in future international relations if the country survives intact.

Around the corner I came across a department store, which I browsed around a bit. It was better stocked than any department store in, say, Pittsburgh. The quality, selection, and price were all high, and the place was busy. This little snippet demonstrates just how much urban China has changed in a few scant decades since the ascetic and tyrannical “Cultural Revolution.” Mousie Dung, whose mausoleum lies in the center of this sea of consumerist decadence, must be turning in his glass-encased crypt (for the record, Green Willow said she had not been to see the great leader and had no desire to do so). Even Dung Shopping, who was in charge during the Tiananmen massacre, would be surprised by the progress.

Walking back to the hotel past all the fast-food joints (McDonald's, KFC, Domino's, Schlotnick's Deli!), I plotted my final menu at one of the seven restaurants at the Friendship Hotel. Should I have the spiced goose head, preserved ox tongue, scallops with tuber wops, and the ox tongue soup, or a Big Mac with chop sticks? Decisions, decisions. I ended up ordering “fried chicken,” not the Colonel's style, but Friendship style, and not fried as advertised, but roasted and hacked into bizarre little pieces (including the head), each one having some bone in it. As with the Peking duck, this bird lacked any flavoring and tasted several days reheated. It was “only” \$15, and I soon began to regret my missed KFC op. The meal was salvaged by a braised, very oily eggplant with chili sauce, which the waitress warned me was “very hot” (apparently by Beijing standards, since it was barely spicy). She suggested that I get some rice to blunt the searing heat of the infernal dish. The rice was a good suggestion, not only because it was some of the best tasting rice I've ever had but because it blunted the grease of the eggplant and this fact should not be underappreciated – the rice was served at the same time as the rest of the entrees! Yes, at virtually every other meal that I had on my entire trip the rice came after all the entrees had been served and usually after the soup, just before dessert. I washed it all down with a “hotel made stout beer” draft and a Perrier and then had a fresh-brewed coffee in a counterrevolutionary backlash against 10 days of weird teas.

And so ends the excellent Chinese adventure of an occidental tourist.

Notes from Beijing
October 2003
by
P.F. Uhler

There have been many evident changes since my first trip here in 1992, and even since my second one three years ago, as a result of the frenetic pace of growth. China is now the fourth largest economy, after the U.S., Japan, and Germany, and will soon be in third place (it became second around 2010 and may be #1 by 2020). New 15-25 story buildings sprout like mushrooms as far the eye can see and everywhere one goes in this vast city, which has some 13 million official inhabitants. Beijing has five beltways that surround the city in concentric rings—and a sixth one is under construction. This six-ring circus is already jammed with traffic at all times of day, promising increasing gridlock. (A seventh ring is being built a decade later, but 7 is not a lucky number in China, so there will no doubt be a most auspicious eighth ring built. Then all they will need is one more to complete the nine circles of hell.)

The most obvious difference over the past decade is the reversal in the ratio of automobiles to bicycles. Despite the traffic and the crowds and the general lack of green spaces, the environment is not too shabby. Streets are spotless and the air reasonably clean, reportedly of good quality two out of every three days. The weather all week is spectacular and the smog is somewhat under control.

A much less palpable change, but perhaps the most important of all, is the one that brings me here. The government has officially embarked upon a major information policy change. Their stated objective is to promote greater openness for their scientific data and the sharing among research institutions and scientists of research resources, including information, materials, and equipment. It is a significant development in an otherwise still tightly controlled national information regime. It should benefit not only their research capabilities, but also our cooperative research projects in the future. It also could be of significant exemplary value to other developing countries.

This is my fourth bilateral meeting on this topic since 2000, and I am here to plan the fifth and most ambitious one for next June. I am thrilled to be playing a recognized major role in this incipient liberalization process.

For this meeting, which they have called the “International Conference on Scientific Resources Sharing Policy,” I have organized a delegation of five top U.S. scientific information policy experts to build on the results of the earlier meetings. Our five complementary presentations provide a detailed overview of U.S. public scientific information policies and practices. Together, they make a very strong case for why China should follow a similar path.

With me are John Rumble, Chief of the Measurement Services Division and the manager of the Standard Reference Data Center at the National Institute of Standards and Technology; Peter Weiss, a lawyer at the Strategic Policy and Planning Office of the National Weather Service and formerly at the White House Office of Management and Budget’s Office of Information and

Regulatory Affairs; Belinda Seto, Director of the Office of Extramural Programs at the National Institutes of Health, who oversees the agency's research grants programs that this year total some \$20 *billion*; and Harlan Onsrud, a lawyer and engineer, who is professor of geospatial information at the University of Maine.

John, who also is the past president of the international CODATA (the interdisciplinary Committee on Data for Science and Technology at the International Council for Science in Paris) and a long-time supporter of my work at the Academy, is giving a presentation on "The Importance of Data Access for Scientific Discovery."

Peter is one of the nation's top experts on federal government information policy. He is very loud and opinionated, and comes across as a bull in a china closet with his genteel hosts. The title of his speech, which is billed as the keynote, is "Borders in Cyberspace: Conflicting Government Information Policies and Their Economic Impacts." He provides empirical analysis of the clear superiority of the U.S. public information management model over that of the European Union. This is perhaps the most important point for the Chinese, who are looking at other countries' policies to determine what approach to take in the rationalization of the management of their own information regime.

Belinda, whom I have just met for the first time, was born in China, but left as a small child with her family for Hong Kong following the communist revolution. It is her first visit back to the mainland since that time. She is very bright and good natured, and is a great addition to our expert group. Her talk is about "The NIH Data Sharing Policy" and the rules that NIH imposes on its grantees in biomedical research. This is very important for the Chinese in their quest to instill a culture of greater cooperation and information sharing among their scientists. They have a difficult task for many reasons, not least because their scientific community is transitioning from a regime of hyper-classification and official secrecy that has been a part of the commie system for decades, to one in which everything is suddenly become commercialized and viewed as a commodity, including publicly funded basic research data. Thus, if it isn't secret, it's available only for a price. It is what I call a process of moving from state secrecy to trade secrecy. As we all try to explain, this is a self-defeating and inefficient system.

Harlan is a long-time colleague, who has chaired my U.S. National Committee for CODATA and has been involved in many of my activities at the Academy, including the previous bilateral meetings with the Chinese. His presentation is on "Expanding Access for Scientists through Emerging Open Access and Public Commons Approaches." He describes institutional and legal models for facilitating scientific data sharing and promoting greater openness with publicly-funded scientific information in academia.

Finally, yours truly has published a series of books and articles over the past 8 years on all these topics, and has just completed some high-level consulting for the OECD and UNESCO in this area that are intended to promote the trend toward the liberalization of public information on a global basis. I also have been organizing the U.S. side of this series of bilateral meetings with the Chinese over the past four years. The title of my talk is "The Role, Value, and Limits of Scientific Information in the Public Domain," which provides a legal overview and rationale for

the U.S. public government and academic information regime that has been the most open in the world.

Prior to this two-day conference, which is held on 14-15 October, we have a day of site visits and informal discussions, which prove to be very interesting. The morning meetings are at our host, Liu Chuang's institution, the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. This institute is leading the push for greater openness. Their rather substantial facilities will soon be demolished, however, because they sit right in the middle of what will be the new Olympic Park.

That afternoon, we visit the National Academy of Traditional Medicine and then the General Hospital of the Peoples' Liberation Army. Both visits are fascinating. The Academy conducts modern research on their ancient medical practices, such as herbal treatments and acupuncture. We first get an extensive briefing on the SARS epidemic. Statistically, those patients who were treated by a combination of modern and traditional medicine did much better than those who received only modern medical treatment. We also get a demonstration of their Web site, which includes a virtual museum of acupuncture. Unfortunately, most of the information they have catalogued online is available only for a fee, a stark reminder of the problems we are there to discuss. Peter, in his inimitable style, rubs it in their face.

We then go to their library of ancient books. These are carefully curated and all have been digitized. We get to see one of their oldest volumes, which was produced almost one thousand years ago and which describes various herbal medicines and depicts their preparation in the imperial court. The drawings are beautiful and the colors in the ink appear as vivid as if they were drawn yesterday. Remarkable.

We conclude the day by visiting the PLA General Hospital. This is the largest hospital in the country and is their equivalent of our Walter Reed hospital. We get a presentation by the hospital director about their history and activities, and then tour the grounds, which are quite impressive.

In addition to these three days of meetings, I am there to plan the big workshop for next spring on "Strategies for Preservation and Open Access of Digital Scientific Information Resources in China: Opportunities and Challenges." We make very good progress before I leave, including a verbal commitment for a \$50K contribution to this activity from the \$20B lady.

We also happen to be in China for the historic launch of their first piloted space mission. The 22-hour space flight is a great success and a highly visible demonstration of China's rapidly improving technological prowess.

Despite the very busy schedule, which includes a lot of time online at the hotel's well-equipped business center, there is opportunity for some fun. We are ensconced in the new 5-star Jade Palace Hotel. It is luxurious indeed, with all the amenities and appointments one would expect from such a rating. It has five good restaurants, a piano lounge with a huge built-in aquarium on one wall, pool/sauna/massage/exercise room/bowling alley/various games, great service, beautiful and spacious guest rooms, etc., etc. I test their piano bar by ordering a very dry

Beefeater martini, straight up, with olives. After considerable discussion I actually get exactly what I ordered.

The restaurants in Beijing (much less, out in the hinterlands) are always an adventure. This trip proves to be no exception, although the quality of the cooking in my small sampling is definitely better. Eating in China is not for the squeamish, or, for what Pa Stan calls “the American center-cut society.” I consider myself a lot more willing to eat strange things than almost all the people I know, but Chinese menus always test my limits. Indeed, one of the perennial mysteries of eating there, even at the best places, is where do all the center cuts disappear?

I suppose that the weirdest thing I try this time is something called “frog fat with crab roe,” assuming that it is in fact the least appealing thing that I ingest, since as usual there are some other dishes of questionable—and unidentified—provenance. I do my best to avoid the most hideous body parts of the most hideous creatures, but the frog fat proves to be less objectionable than it most definitely sounds.

I eat about half my meals (not counting breakfast) outside the hotel. The breakfast is a huge buffet of western and oriental items. I stick mostly to the oriental, which are better prepared and have less fat and starch. I have a variety of pickled vegetables, including a mild form of kimchee, and stir-fried greens, and fruit. The coffee is surprisingly good—another improvement over past years. They even have Starbucks outlets in Beijing now. Otherwise, I eat two times each in the hotel’s Japanese sushi and traditional Chinese restaurants. All these are very good, but not particularly memorable.

More interesting are my meals out, which include a Muslim Restaurant hotpot lunch, a Peking duck dinner that is excellent (better than two previous versions I’ve had in Beijing), and a Sichuan lunch that is very good, but has some of those questionable and unknown items. I have duck webbed feet at the duck joint, which, when dipped in a hot mustard sauce, are palatable. All this is typically washed down with copious amounts of tea and either beer or wine. China is now on a big wine craze and their local wines have graduated from being very bad to quite decent. The country already has become the world’s tenth largest wine producer in the world.

I also go on two big shopping excursions that yield a lot of really nice stuff. It involves a great deal of haggling—which I neither enjoy nor am very good at. Among the most interesting and expensive items is the tea. I get several lessons in formal tea service, including at the Imperial Tea House on the grounds of the Temple of Heaven, just south of Tiananmen Square. This is an exquisite place, serving the highest tea ceremony and selling the best tea and tea sets. I buy some lichi nut tea that is beautifully sweet and fragrant, and some tea cups that change the decoration on the outside of the cup when the hot tea is poured in.

I also go to two other tea places. One is the Lao-she Tea House, which I visited on my previous trip. It has a schmaltzy variety show they call “the Beijing Opera.” It is not, despite some singing. But I also buy some very nice gifts there, including an embroidered silk jacket for Allison.

The other place is a very expensive tea house and store on Wangfuxing Street, the main shopping street in the city center. I buy two kinds of green tea here, one of which is the most expensive one they have, which costs about \$400/lb.

The Temple of Heaven itself is a vast, ancient, and beautiful compound. It consists of a large, round main temple on a hill, surrounded by many other structures and gardens, and encircled by a high wall. The entire area is perhaps 200 acres. The temple was built about 600 years ago by a Ming dynasty emperor to honor the heavens and perform sacred rites and animal sacrifices.

Finally, and most important, are the people with whom I am cooperating. They are absolutely the most friendly and gracious individuals. This is true whether they are people I have known for ten years, or am just meeting for the first time. Even the day-to-day service people typically are pleasant.

I look forward to my future visits, next time hopefully with my son, Alex.

Notes from Beijing
June 2005
by
P.F. Uhler

I am on my way again to Beijing. This time I have been invited by the Chief Librarian of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) to give a presentation on “The Open Availability of Scientific Information at the U.S. National Academies—An Overview of Policy and Practice.” It is part of an invitation-only international conference on strategies and policies on open access to scientific information, particularly journals. I also am using the opportunity to meet with my other colleagues at the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST) and CAS to follow up on my earlier and continuing work with the Chinese S&T policy establishment.

I have used 30K miles to upgrade to business class on United and have been given a first class seat on the short trip from Dulles to Chicago, but am wait-listed for the long leg to Beijing. This really ticks me off, since I expressly told the United reservation agent not to use my miles for the domestic leg, since I will lose the 30K miles even if they cannot get me a business seat from Chicago to Beijing. They do it anyway. Perhaps another sign of why they are constantly on the verge of bankruptcy.

I get to Chicago and sure enough, they inform me that business class is oversold and I am very unlikely to get upgraded. I wait until most people have boarded and, not hearing my name called, I board the flight and sit in my economizing space, stewing over my misfortune. Just before we depart, however, I am informed that I can move up to better digs and my mood recovers. On the 12-hour flight I sleep almost 6 and eat some decent food. Maybe they won't go bankrupt after all.

Day 1

I arrive in Beijing on Fathers' Day, well rested. I am met by an information resources management graduate student, Hui Yao. We go across the street to the cavernous garage to find the driver with the sedan. The place is perhaps the 5th circle of hell. It is very hot and humid, with gridlocked cars, horns blaring. My throat starts to burn. We make it out of there in perhaps 10 minutes, which feel much longer.

The air outside is horrible. There is a typical overcast inversion trapping all the pollution in a dense toxic fog. The Chinese are choking on their own success. The East is gray. En route we discuss the open access issue and my presentation. Hui Yao speaks good English and she asks all the right questions.

After a ½-hour ride we turn onto an avenue that I recognize from five-years earlier, when I first stayed at the Friendship Hotel. It is a 4-star place that has 1900 rooms in five buildings. Just another of the seemingly infinite numbers of fancy hotels in this city. It actually is one of the first that the government used to house foreigners when China initially opened up. It has since been refurbished and is quite nice.

I start to make a list of all the changes in the hotel and in its immediate vicinity that have occurred since my last visit. There are now 80+ channels on the TV and in-room Internet connection. There is a beer garden outside. The hotel restaurants are serving fewer dishes with the traditional weird ingredients. The new menu has only a few—goose intestines, pork stomach, duck webs, fish maws—you know, the classics. I just can't help wonder where all the prime cuts of meat end up when all the best places are serving the offal.

I take a walk outside to loosen up and get some cash. My list continues to grow. There are many more fancy stores and American fast food and pizza outlets. More people are wearing shorts. The taxis are newer and cleaner and bigger. The ATM machine has instructions in English. There are a few beggars and bicyclists on the street. Street vendors everywhere are selling the latest pirated DVD—*Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. This is not a new activity, just more conspicuous. I get to bed relatively early and sleep quite well until dawn.

Day 2

It is full daylight at 5:30. The evening thunderstorms have swept away the clouds and most of the smog, and the sky is actually blue and reasonably clear. I do some editing and go get a buffet breakfast of various sautéed and pickled vegetables. This is a traditional food I do like, especially for a light and healthy breakfast. It reminds me of a traditional Japanese breakfast, which is my favorite in the world. I go back to my room to do some more work and around 11:30 I get tired and decide to nap. I awake, still tired, 3 hours later, but force myself to get up. I do a little more work and then go get a massage to refresh me. A 1/2-hour upper-body massage is just \$12, including a good tip. I feel much better.

I go out for a walk. It is in the 90s F., but dry and much better than the day before. A lot of the locals are using parasols. I duck inside a fashion center to do some browsing and end up buying a supposedly Italian shirt for \$14. I spot a nice tie, ostensibly from Britain, for which they want over \$90! I pass.

I go back to the hotel for some e-mailing. At around 7:00 p.m., I decide to go across the street for dinner to a fancy Thai restaurant. Nothing is in English and no one speaks any, but the menu has nice pictures. I try to avoid things that look either too hot or of dubious origin, which makes my choice easy, because there's only one dish that looks worth the gamble. It appears to be a stir fry of shrimp with veggies.

Indeed, this is what it is, although of course they can't resist throwing a few questionable ingredients in, just to keep me on my toes. One I recognize as dried shrimp, which have a very strong, uh, flavor and a jerky texture. I decide I have to fish those pieces out after one small bite. There also are a lot of little curly white items that look like they might be some kind of grubs, although with no other defining features. They have a leathery texture and not much taste, but I try to avoid them just the same. The whole dish is otherwise very bland and greasy, reminiscent of canned Chun King from a few unfortunate childhood meals, when no one knew any better. It is bad Cantonese cuisine masquerading as fancy Thai food. I am disappointed, but relieved that the whole mess has cost only \$6.

I head off down the street to see the new Star Wars III: The Revenge of the Sith. I am hoping that it is dubbed. It is not. I buy a ticket through the process of deduction, since it is the only title with the Roman numeral 3 in a list of Chinese titles. I also buy some popcorn and Coke, just to make it the complete movie experience à la the U.S. The Coke is good, but the popcorn is some Chinese version, with no melted butter. The popcorn has strands of red and blue colored additives, which may be some kind of artificial fruit chemicals. Hard to say. They just can't leave things well enough alone. The movie screen is huge, like the ones we once used to have in the U.S.

The moon is almost full and clear in the sky—another item for my list. I get back to my hotel room just before midnight. My phone message light is blinking. I call three places to retrieve it before realizing that the instructions are in Chinese. The front desk says to wait 5 minutes while they change the recording to English. I decide to start writing this travelogue, since I am not tired, but no messages are forthcoming.

Days 3-5

I am at the workshop for two days and then at a ½ day morning meeting to strategize next steps. The workshop is funded by the Soros Foundation's Open Access Institute. They have provided some modest funding for several of my developing country workshops on open access and preservation of digital scientific info, one very high level meeting in Beijing a year earlier and another one about to take place in September in Pretoria for the southern African region. Soros is a rich, liberal activist who is trying to use his immense fortune to change the world in ways I approve. I am pleased to make common cause, even if only in small ways.

As noted at the outset, the workshop is focused on open access (OA) models and strategies for scientific journals. All the usual suspects are there. It is a great group of like-minded intellectuals and activists who have seen the light. Some of the presentations are really good. My own is actually rather bad, since the topic I have been asked to report on is not on my own activities. I therefore am using slides provided by the Academy and PNAS publishers. I am uninspired and it shows.

What is especially important is that the CAS library people, who have some ability to effectuate change in the Chinese system, really understand what is going on and what needs to be done to liberate the scientific literature online. Dr. Zheng Xiaolin, the CAS library director, is an impressive man. He also appears to have a very capable staff and the library itself is very modern, high-tech, and architecturally impressive. It would be a top-notch library in America or Europe.

Nonetheless, they face a formidable challenge, since they are trying to revise a very conservative, hide-bound publishing culture. While their targets are probably not much different from the ones in the West, the payoff in China, with its centralized decision making and funding system, could actually make a big difference, fast. We do our best to brainstorm to see how this might be done.

Like with every major meeting in Beijing, we are feted for lunch and dinner with multi-course feasts. The food is generally quite good and the company is great. In the evenings I try the hotel massage a couple more times, since it is a bargain and really relaxing. The group closes the hotel beer garden every night. I get to know Jean-Claude Guédon of the University of Montreal quite well. He is a philosopher and one of the intellectual leaders of the OA journal movement. His first wife, who died a few years back, was Czech. We have a lot to talk about and he is a delightful conversationalist.

The last evening I go to Sanlihe Street, which is supposed to be an upscale night-club area. No one is game to go with me, so I go alone. I am surprised that much of it consists of pimps on the street hawking girls in “night clubs”. The red Chinese puritanical mores are crumbling. I walk the length of the short strip, accosted every few meters by another purveyor of flesh. I have to dodge one who tries to glom onto me. A large crowd is gathered in the middle to hear some free outdoor music, which I skip. On the other end I find some of the advertised upscale music bars and discos of various ethnic varieties. I go into a Brazilian place and get a bad mojito. I am just not into it. I stop at another Chinese rock bar on the way back out of curiosity. The band could be worse, but one thing’s for sure: Beijing keeps changing a lot.

Notes from Lijiang
November 2011
by
P.F. Uhler

Lijiang is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, about 200km south of Shangri-la and just this side of Nirvana. The town is in the middle of Yunnan province in SW China. Yunnan is bordered in the south by Vietnam and Laos, in the southwest by Burma, and in the northwest by Tibet. To the east are other Chinese provinces.

Yunnan is home to several Chinese minorities, which the Chinese government invests in and protects, as long as they toe the line. The local ethnic “nationality” is the Naxi (“Nassi”) people, most heavily influenced by the Tibetan culture, but apparently not the politics.

Lijiang is actually a small city of about one hundred thousand people, with the historic core being the tourist attraction. It sits at a high altitude. At 2600m (about 8000 ft.) you can definitely feel it (think Vail). Around it are the eastern “foothills” of the Himalayas, with most of the surrounding mountains in the 3000-3200m range, and several majestic peaks rising 4200-4500m.

Not far from town, across one of the lower mountain ranges, flows the upper tributary of the Yangtze river. The valleys and hillsides are dotted with small traditional towns, boasting well-tended farmland and some cattle. The air is pollution-free, a rarity in China, at least to the east, though you can’t drink the tap water, just like everywhere else.

It is early November and cool, about 15C daytime and 7C at night. It is also the beginning of the dry season, with the wet and overcast skies extending earlier, in the June-October period.

It is best if you can avoid an organized tour, like I did. I was accompanied, all expenses paid, by Liu Chuang, a professor of geography at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a long-time friend and project collaborator of mine. She is bi-lingual and has hired a local car and driver, a Naxi fellow with a brand new (10-day old) Toyota SUV. It is definitely the way to go. For a non-Chinese tourist, a package tour is the only other reasonable arrangement. Although the locals are very hospitable and friendly, almost none speaks any English or other western language, so traveling solo is a dicey proposition.

Also not for the faint of heart are the driving conventions and the bathrooms. The roads and the driving I describe at some length below. The public toilets, well, they are what they are. By far the preferred option is your upscale hotel room. This is followed by the great outdoors, unless you like to squat in filth, which on occasion is unavoidable (but see my travelog from Tunisia for the ultimate toilet horror show).

Day One—The River

The upper Yangtze river lies over a mountain range perhaps just 15 km as the crow flies. Getting there, however, is a different matter. Our driver picks us up at 8:30 and we embark on the first local road trip.

The road itself is quite good, although there is no room for error. I should have visited one of the many Buddhist prayer mounds before we left and made a devout wish. The road is built up from the surrounding landscape at least 1m, if not more, with no shoulders. Straying over the edge means an instant roll over, or worse. Because it is mountainous almost everywhere, except in Dongba valley in which Lijiang is situated, the roads are very curvy and steep, with little opportunity to see whether there is any oncoming traffic. Unfortunately, there is a lot of it because of tourism, agricultural work, and road construction going on all over. There are many slow tractors and trucks. There are also lots of tour buses, cars, various jalopies, and the occasional bicyclists, who clearly have a death wish. The roads all seem to have painted lines in the center for passing, but they needn't have bothered.

In my observations of the Chinese people over the past two decades or so, I have noticed a yin-yang disposition or national character that is more pronounced than in western societies. On the one hand, they are friendly, polite and generous to a fault, especially with foreigners, and make this traveler always delighted to be there. On the other hand, they are very competitive—and can be very pushy and egotistical, especially among themselves. It is this side of their personality that has made them so relentlessly driven and successful. This Jekyll and Hyde set of characteristics seems pervasive, with a soft and kind persona in most social and cultural relations, and a ruthless rivalry in the economic and political realms.

Not so with driving, which is always seen as a battle of survival of the fittest and might makes right. The two determining characteristics are above all size and secondarily speed. Thus, while the trucks are slow and hog the road as much as possible, all the other motorized vehicles, from buses on down, are faster and exercise their muscles accordingly.

This is tolerable, if obnoxious, on straight, multi-lane highways, but attains a form of Russian roulette on windy country roads. Especially brazen are the bus drivers, who will pass at every perceived opportunity, including blind curves with no possibility for the oncoming traffic to pass in-between the vehicles or to go on the side to the non-existent shoulder. The drivers of cars do it as well, with the faster cars relentlessly gobbling up the slower vehicles. Our driver does it too, although he appears to be a little bit more calculating of the risk than others, which isn't saying much. It is why I sit in the back and pray for deliverance, or at least delivery in one piece. What's absolutely incredible is that there are no head-on crashes, much less smaller accidents, that I can spot there or most anywhere in my travels in China.

The first stop on the other side of the mountain is at a famous 90° bend in the river, where there are rides available on small boats. These boats are large inflatable rafts, actually two tubes fused together, with a small center aisle basically large enough for one foot. We don some small life vests and hold on to the occasional straps on the tubes. The boat, or whatever you would call it, is driven by one man and another comes along for the ride, presumably to rescue anyone who

falls over. Fortunately, there is almost no traffic on the river, since I'm sure the same competition would prevail there as on the roads.

The day is sunny, but chilly, especially on the open water. The scenery is majestic, with increasingly tall mountains on either side. The east (right) side of the river belongs to the Lijiang district, while the west is part of the Shangri-la district and part of Tibet further up. We don't go nearly that far and after about 45 minutes we are dropped off at a small docking place where our driver is waiting to resume the ride.

The next stop, about a half-hour drive further downstream, is the Leaping Tiger Gorge. The Yangtze in this upstream part flows to the north, before it winds its way to the south to the highly criticized Three Gorges Dam, and beyond. The Leaping Tiger Gorge is very narrow and very deep, with class 5 rapids in the middle. It is supposedly so narrow that a tiger could leap across it, but despite a considerable narrowing of the channel, a tiger would certainly drown if it were foolish enough to try—not that there are any tigers around there to begin with. It is also very deep, not the water itself, but the canyon that surrounds it. The Chinese take great pride in pointing out that this is the deepest canyon in the world, supposedly much more than the Grand Canyon, but it seems a misnomer to me since the river is flanked by very high mountains and not a true canyon per se, at least not with vertical cliffs except at the bottom.

Whatever it is properly called, it is very impressive. We eat lunch there, first trying some hand-held roasted corn and yams at an open air market, and then some mediocre stir-fry at an al fresco restaurant (the only one there). The Lijiang side has a really well constructed stone pathway bordering the river, with several tunnels through the cliffs. The walk is a couple of km, ending with several overlooks at the wild rapids. Those who get tired can hire one of the rickshaws there. On the Shangri-la side there is a road that takes you to a more touristy overlook of the rapids, and the road continues northwards from there. It suggests a trip for another time.

The ride back to Lijiang takes almost two hours and we arrive around 5:00. Since all of China is on Beijing time and we have travelled some 2,000 km to the southeast, the sun sets about an hour later in the day. We take advantage of the remaining daylight and walk around old town Lijiang, which rivals Bruges as the most terminally charming town on the planet.

It is a very large area that is pedestrian only. The narrow streets, which meander through the old town complex, are paved with big flagstones. The place is spotless. The oldest structures are some 800 years old, but all the others are built in the same style. A large portion of the compound is made up of inns, each more inviting than the next, with open courtyards and comfortable lounges in the front. I am not so sure about the state of the actual accommodations, however.

The rest of the buildings consist of an endless array of stores, many restaurants, and some bars. There are only a limited number of types of stores, with perhaps 70 selling the same wool scarves, another 50 selling the same type of leather bags, etc. The stores also are way overpriced, as might be expected, with the same merchandise selling for a fraction of the cost right outside the old town area. This would be tiresome, if it were not for the great architecture, the charming

atmosphere, and the narrow canals that run along many of the streets, bordered by willow trees and flowers. It really is spectacular.

The restaurants are pretty good and many sit open air on the canals. There also are lots of local fast food outlets. I call them yak shacks since they only sell yak meat in various forms of spicy barbecue and jerky preparations. I try some and it is quite tasty, but I do not make a meal out of it. Maybe if I were hiking in the mountains. Another culinary novelty included a few restaurants that butchered and barbecued suckling pigs and goats on the cobblestone streets. I'm a sucker for suckling pig, so we try one for dinner, but it's not as good as it looks. Tant pis. I try stewed goat for another meal elsewhere, and it is better. If they had served baby goat, I would have had that (memories of Tijuana).

On the vegetable front, the region is renowned for its mushrooms, of which there are quite a few kinds, and I try them both in a hot pot and stir fried. They are good both ways, but not outstanding. I particularly like the local potatoes, which are pure white with pink marbling and not starchy at all. They look like turnips, but they're not. The local greens are not found elsewhere and are tasty as well. After eating all this exotica (I eschew the ubiquitous caterpillar fungus and the bamboo grubs) I suppose I am fortunate just to have some severe indigestion on the third morning!

Day Two—The Mountains

The river on the first day was spectacular, but I am a mountain man at heart, and I really look forward to actually being in the high mountains. You certainly can see them from Lijiang and the surrounding countryside, but you need to drive about 45 minutes to get up close and personal.

In the morning, we first go to another agricultural town, where they have many horseback rides. This is apparently a very popular tourist attraction, with an hour jaunt by horse up and down some steep hills, followed by a boat ride in a small canoe type boat, and then a sampling of local teas. There is caravan departing every 5 or 10 minutes. The horse trail is very picturesque and seemingly quite dangerous, at least if it weren't for the hands-on guidance of the local Sherpa. I hate horses, which are smelly, insect-infested, uncomfortable and unpredictable, and this one is no different. We go straight up a narrow trail, over streams and next to waterfalls, until we get to a small corral, where I can dismount and see a picturesque pond and streams (as well as take a leak in the bushes). Local traders sell some staples there and pose with gussied up goats and mountain dress.

I come back to the corral and get on another, larger horse, which turns out to be less cooperative than the one I rode up. I am reminded of the lyrics of some song about not changing horses in the middle of the stream. It is true. My Sherpa admonishes me and the people riding behind me laugh. After about 5 minutes of this I have had enough and get off the uncooperative beast, preferring to walk the other half of the trip down the mountain. I step gingerly through the horse pucky and try to take in the scenery, which certainly would be more compelling under better circumstances.

Another 20 minutes or so later we arrive back at the starting point in the small town. Following another filthy pit stop, we embark on our next activity, the boat ride. We go down towards the lake through some wetlands and come upon a line of tourists who are waiting to board one of the wooden dinghies in which they propose to ferry us unfortunates. There are about ten tourists crammed into a small boat with one guy with a pole steering the craft through a shallow canal. After looking at this spectacle for a few minutes, we decide that this is a must miss and head back for some tea. Venice it ain't.

The tea service turns out to be quite entertaining, however, with three kinds of different local teas served—a high mountain herbal tea, a red tea also from the mountains, and a yulong tea flavored with lychee nuts. The teas are served by a handsome young Naxi woman in traditional dress who speaks incessantly to me in the hopes that I can understand something. Fortunately, Liu Chuang translates quite a bit. The teas all have certain supposed therapeutic qualities, such as upper respiratory, stomach, and high blood pressure relief, and I'm sure that if you believe that strongly enough, they do. Some might actually do so even if you don't. As an aside, I keep a steady supply of Banlangen Keli, a dried root that really works wonders on the common cold. It was recommended by a Chinese doctor from NIH who was sitting next to me on one of my previous flights to Beijing. It is not a tea per se, but it's easy to drink and works well—at least I think so!

We buy a whole bunch of tea there, since it's much cheaper than in Lijiang or Beijing, and then head for the mountains. We go up Dongba valley, with the mountains becoming higher and more scenic. Unfortunately, just as we get near to the tallest ones, they become enveloped in some transient clouds and there is little point in going forward. This is a great disappointment.

Since it is lunchtime anyway, we head back down the valley to another preserved old town, which is also very charming and has some good restaurants. We have a decent lunch, look around, and take some pictures. I buy a belt that looks like it's made by some Native Americans in our Southwest. While doing so, we are approached by three shy students from the local university, who are studying tourism and hotel management. Their assignment is to speak with some foreign tourists. They explain this to Liu Chuang and after I have bought my belt they approach me and say a few words in very broken English. They all want to take a picture shaking hands with me, so they have proof of their assignment, and I oblige. Hopefully they will learn to speak better English before they graduate.

By the time we have finished this, the clouds appear to have lifted over the mountain peaks, so we decide to go back. The highway is very good and quite straight through the valley, but when we approach the foothills, we have to pay a quite expensive toll (almost \$10). About 10 minutes later we arrive at a very big and modern visitor center, where they have shuttle buses to go up into the mountains. This is also expensive (almost \$20).

The drive up is very scenic. There are two lifts there, but unfortunately the higher one is closed for maintenance. The lower one is still nice and after paying yet another fee we get to about 3200m. From there you can either walk further up the mountain or take an electric open air trolley, the kind you see in amusement parks. This also costs more money, but at that altitude, it's worth it. We finally get up to a small visitor center, with hiking trails through forests and a big meadow, and granite peaks rising another 1000m or more above that. Very photogenic! I also

buy a small, but spectacular, book of very professional photos, which is a real joy. After about ½ hour there, we make the return trip, but stop at a series of cascading reservoirs with artificial dams that are built to look like natural waterfalls. This too is very beautiful and I take a lot of pictures, even though it is dusk.

We get back to Lijiang after sunset. We have the suckling pig dinner and walk around. I decide to go bar hopping, since the middle of town has very noisy open-air joints, some with live music, some with a very accomplished DJ/entertainer, and some with just a disco. The first place I go is much more sedate—Au Petit Paris—which has an acoustic guitarist who plays songs for the patrons while they sing on stage. It is kind of a live karaoke, and more entertaining than the canned variety. I order some Calvados, which is not easy, since no one there speaks French (silly me), much less English. (I also stop at the Prague Café earlier, with the same disappointment—I would love to find a Chinese person who speaks Czech, although there is one, the director of the CAS Institute for Remote Sensing Applications in Beijing, with whom I speak French.) After some time I go to another one of the big open air bars that has the DJ. It is packed with tourists and young people. You do not have to speak English to be entertained. After about a half hour of this I go to a quieter coffeehouse/bar with acoustic music. The lead singer sings off-key, although the band appears to have a local following, and I leave soon after. It is a lively nightlife in the middle of nowhere.

* * *

The next morning we take a flight to Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, which has over one million people. It is well developed, with a lot of high rises, but rather non-descript. Liu Chuang hires another private driver and we spend most of the day riding and walking through very scenic sandstone formations about an hour's drive from the city, that are part of a large state park. It is very well developed and interesting, but not as much fun as Lijiang.

I return to the U.S on a 25-hour journey to Washington, via Beijing, the next day.

Notes from Xining
May 2012
by
Paul F. Uhler

I am in Beijing from Sunday afternoon to Thursday morning in late May for a series of meetings with several Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), including the Institute for Remote Sensing Applications (IRSA) and the Center for Earth Observations and Digital Earth (CEODE). Representatives from these two organizations are paying for my trip this time. I also am visiting old buddies from the Institute of Microbiology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (IMCAS), the Computer and Network Information Center (CNIC) of CAS, which also serves as the secretariat for the Chinese National Committee for CODATA (one of my counterparts), and the Remote Sensing Center for the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), which is the Chinese S&T funding agency and serves as the nation's secretariat for the Group on Earth Observations. It is a very productive series of meetings.

I also am eating particularly well this time and very varied food. There is southern Chinese cuisine, Peking duck, Japanese barbecue, German hofbrau, expensive Italian, and a great Intercontinental Hotel breakfast. A few merit some further comment.

I am staying at the Olympic Village Garden Hotel, obviously built for the 2008 Olympics, so it is very modern and still clean. The accommodations are great. Also directly connected with the hotel is the German Landgraf restaurant, with *echt bier vom fass* from Cologne, and cute Chinese waitresses in traditional German dress and dirndls. No one speaks English, but it doesn't matter because the menu has pictures and all the dishes have German and English descriptions. The food is basic hofbrau fare, which is less echt than the beer, but more than palatable. The only unfortunate situation is that they have a deal with the hotel to serve a free breakfast, which is really quite bad, at least by Beijing hotel standards.

The Japanese barbecue was a surprise. I was taken there for lunch by the informatics director at IMCAS. It is in a non-descript building off the main road on the fifth floor. No westerner would ever find it. I have low expectations when I arrive, but instead have the best meal of that kind I have had anywhere and among the most memorable Japanese food.

I also had one of the best Italian dinners I've had, which is saying something. It is also the most expensive Italian meal, which is also saying something. It is the trattoria in the Intercontinental Hotel. Earlier that day I got an unexpected "consulting fee" of about \$160 from IMCAS, so I decided to blow it and then some, since everything else on this trip is being paid.

Finally, I have a breakfast meeting again at the Interconti on the last morning before I leave for Xining. The hotel has the best breakfast buffet I've had anywhere, including at fancy Swiss and Belgian hotels. I stayed at that hotel before, so I knew they had a great breakfast.

At this point, I should digress and sing the praises of the Intercontinental hotel chain. Not only is everything top notch, but I've had my best food at Intercontinentals in Santiago, Delhi,

Wellington, and an awesome live jazz brunch in NOLA. Although that hotel chain is one of the best in the world, I've had great meals at many other high-end hotels, including the Meridien and the Metropole in Brussels. What particularly irks me is the notion that hotels don't serve great food, which is propagated by snooty food critics and tourists. End of rant.

* * *

I leave for the Beijing airport about 1.5 hours before the departure of the flight for Xining. Of course, we hit a major traffic jam and I am sure we will miss the plane. However, we get to the gate just as they are boarding and the bags make it on the other end.

The trip to Xining is actually why I am in China this time. I am an invited participant in an international workshop of 15 scientists, who got travel and meeting funds from the Asia-Pacific Network on Global Change Research (APN), which is funded in part by our National Science Foundation (NSF) and several other Pacific Rim countries. I previously participated in an APN workshop organized by the Chinese and held in Ulaan Baatar, which was a place I always wanted to go (see my Notes from Ulaan Baatar).

This time, I am enticed not only by Xining, which I know nothing about, but by Tibet, where the workshop is supposed to end up on the last 4 days. Xining is the last city in China that you get the overnight train to Lhasa. The train is crucial because you get gradually acclimated from an elevation of 2500m in Xining to 4500 in Lhasa. Some people who fly from sea level directly to Tibet get altitude sickness and have to leave. Moreover, the scenery on the train ride promises to be spectacular, and we are supposed to go to some other, even higher, places in Tibet.

Unfortunately, a couple days before my departure to China I find out that I and two other foreign members of the APN delegation have been denied internal visas to the Tibet portion of the trip. This actually is not at all surprising, since access by foreigners is controlled tightly by the Chinese government as a military zone and this year is much worse than usual. Not only is there a great deal of political unrest and horrible self-immolations (some 30 reported this year), but it is a transition year for the top Beijing leadership and no one wants to be party to any unnecessary waves. In the United States we routinely deny boatloads of Chinese visitor visas. Neither government gives any explanations, even though the denials frequently seem arbitrary.

My Chinese hosts are profusely apologetic and I decide to come anyway, since I have a bunch of side meetings, and cut my trip short by 5 days, which also has its benefits. My Chinese colleagues think that travel to Tibet will again loosen up next year, and they promise to invite me and pay for the trip. I am disappointed but have no complaints.

Xining is a city of about 2.5 million people in QingHai province. It is about 1500km and a 2.5-hour plane ride west of Beijing. I expect a dumpy town, but I should know better. As is well known, China in the last quarter century has seen an unparalleled expansion and modernization of its infrastructure, especially for a big country that began with such a modest level of development. I have been a witness of this expansion over the past 20 years. One could assume that this would occur in the biggest cities, which it has on a spectacular scale, but it also has

tremendously improved the material well-being and outward appearance of all metropolitan regions, even in the less developed west.

This is my third trip to the western parts of China (see my Notes from Dunhuang and the Mogao caverns in the Gobi in 2004 and Notes from Lijiang in 2011—both UNESCO World Heritage sites). Each time I have been impressed by the building frenzy and especially the infrastructure: the roads, the airports, hotels, bureaucracies and so on. That is not to say that many aspects are not still quite primitive (read “traditional”) and undeveloped, but that is not only to be expected, but has certain values of its own—both cultural and political, if not economic. More on that later.

From driving around and flying over it, Xining has about 300 skyscrapers of 20-40 stories, usually in groups of 5 or 10, and dozens being built, each with a mammoth crane by its side. Indeed, the crane should be the national bird, since there are more here than anywhere else, and the crane is an ancient Chinese symbol of good luck.

We are housed in what is billed as a 4-star hotel. It’s not bad, but all the carpets could use a replacement, the shower water alternates frequently between hot and cold, and the karaoke bar doesn’t have to boom its music until 4 a.m. However, it could be worse.

The first night we eat at a Muslim restaurant nearby, where we have a hotpot meal that is really very good. I eschew the yak throat, but generally find everything else to be delicious, especially the sweet potato noodles that are truly ethereal. The local beer is better than the others I’ve had in China, and the tea is excellent as well.

* * *

After a fitful night of sleep that is due more to my continuing jet lag than the incessant karaoke decibels, I get up at 3:30 a.m. and work on the high-speed internet connection in my room. It is as good as can be expected at a hotel anywhere in the world and I get a lot done.

That morning we are all going to QingHai lake, the largest in China and a salt water lake. There is a renowned bird sanctuary there as well, which has a CAS research station co-located with it. We pile on to a bus and head out of town, first navigating a half-hour traffic jam going towards the city center. Once outside the city, the landscape turns to southern New Mexico style of mountains, with no trees and plenty of scenery. Up and up we climb, from the city level of 2200m to a pass that’s about 3500m. One can definitely feel the thin air, but more important, we see the difference with sunshine, turning to rain, and then thick snow with low visibility. There are several cm on the ground and at the top there is a general white out. No skiing unfortunately.

We go over the pass and down to a town with a tourist trap. The store has every stripe of yak you can digest, including dried yak penises, no doubt for the discerning aficionado. There is a center quadrangle of burlap bags containing all kinds of dried meat, each staffed with a local attendant and a bowl of the stuff for free tasting, in case you are sufficiently enticed. I walk around the perimeter and then head through a maze of bagged yak meat, also of every flavor and stripe. After several rows of this I get to the local crafts made from the yak and sheep materials,

especially the horns, leather, and textiles, and some jade. I buy a massage stick made from the end of a horn and an artisanal wallet, which I give as presents to my nephews.

We get back on the bus after about ½ hour of this and go to our next stop by the lake, where we have a decent lunch. The food is pretty good, with a freshness of ingredients you can taste, but I'm sure you would not want to see the preparation. The hygiene, especially the outhouses out back is atrocious (top 5 bad). They are so bad, in fact, that I decide to hold it, hoping for a better loo at the next stop, which turns out to be a good move.

The lake itself is on a high plateau, at about 3000m. It is ringed by mountains that range from about 3500m up to 4500m snow-capped peaks, and the whole scenery is outstanding. All along there are gazillions of sheep and some yaks and mules, and various gers (or yurts, depending on which Mongolia you are in) and small, government-built, modest brick homes. It's wide open country, the kind you would see in the American west. The road is well paved, but bumpy, and the traffic basically treats the 2-lanes as 4. The good news is that the road is fairly straight, with few obstructions, but the passing gets the juices flowing. I imagine 4 trucks meeting up at a small crest in the road.

After another 1.5 hours on the increasingly cramped bus we get close to our destination and stop at a real hotel with some real WCs. What a relief. The rain, which has been heavy for the last half hour, suddenly gives way to sunshine and blue skies and we head off for the last few km to the bird sanctuary and center.

We are treated as VIPs, with a local police escort and allowed to take our bus into the compound instead of riding the center's own shuttles. Once there, we first go to the building itself, which is very impressive. They have a corridor that extends perhaps a full km, which is lined on the walls by beautiful pictures of the local animals, plants, and landscape. Most of the photos are about 1 by 2 meters in size. Every couple hundred meters there is a small souvenir shop. At the end is an observatory with one way mirror glass to watch the birds nesting, and right after that there is a small theater, that shows several locations with different nesting birds. They have instrumented each location with several automated cameras, so that you can see the birds' nesting and daily activities "up close and personal." It is the time of year when the young crack open their eggs, so it even more interesting,

Since we are a VIP delegation from CAS, we get to see the control room right after the theater show and get a personal and extended viewing of the different sites. The explanations are unfortunately in Chinese only, but the videos are worth a thousand words; as the Chinese would say, 10,000 words.

After the center, we all go to a dock and vantage point, with very well constructed wood stairs and passages overlooking the lake, a "bird rock, and dramatic cliffs and desert-like dunes in the distance. The place at the dockside is very reminiscent of a similar spot at the southern tip of the Cape of Good Hope that I've been to. Small ferries come and go from the dock and there is a post office shack with stamps commemorating the local scenery. We stay for at least another half hour, walking around and taking pictures, before we head back on the long journey to Xining.

I should note that I have been to quite a few national parks, historical sites, and museums in China and they are really well curated and maintained, with first rate infrastructure and amenities. They obviously appreciate and take good care of these enclaves, even if (or because) they desecrate and pollute the general environment.

We arrive at Xining at 10:00 p.m. Since most good restaurants are closed, we stop at a place with “street food”, a row of shacks in which you can either buy take out or sit at a few tables. It is the kind of place that tour books all tell you to avoid. We don’t go very far down the street and opt for one of the shacks nearby that serves Muslim style noodles and barbecued lamb. They also serve beer, so they are not religiously strict. There is some very good bread to go with it and metal bowls of chiles in oil, which I like. A sooty basket of raw garlic accompanies the food, which, I am told by a colleague, is a good precaution against parasites. There is a roll of toilet paper for napkins in an otherwise rather filthy establishment. I like the meal but hope that I don’t get sick, and I don’t (at least not yet!).

We get back to the hotel close to 11:00 p.m., so there is not much to do but read my emails and go to sleep.

* * *

The next day, is a workshop of the group on data management in global change research. About half of us give presentations and we have some discussion. The meeting is in a very well furnished and equipped meeting room, and both the presentations and discussions are interesting.

We go to yet another Muslim restaurant nearby, which is much more upscale, but not all that good. There are lots of women with traditional dress and head scarves there, and I am told that they are getting ready to celebrate a wedding.

After lunch we part company, with most of the group getting ready to take the train to Tibet. I stay on for some sightseeing with Nordin Mohd Hasan, the director of the Asian regional office for ICSU.

We get a guide to take us to some Tibetan Buddhist temples and monasteries. The guide shall remain nameless in this recounting, so he would not get into trouble with the authorities, as will become apparent below.

We are in the area where the current Dalai Lama was born (not the official Chinese government doppelganger). He points out the town, Peng’li, as we head out into the countryside.

The first stop is a cliffside temple, accessible by quite steep carved in stone steps. A lone monk presides over the establishment in a single room. The temple is on a couple of floors and is barely furnished. It is somewhat reminiscent of Mesa Verde or Chaco Canyon, but on a much smaller scale. We climb up and look around, while Hassan takes a number of pictures.

On the way back, we pay homage to the monk. He does not speak any English, but our guide translates a few pleasantries. I leave some cash in the collection urn for his next visit to Trader Joe’s ;-)

From the first temple we drive quite a ways to another complex that is both a temple and a monastery, embedded in a forested mountain setting. It is breathtaking in more ways than one. Not only is it a beautiful place with a view of the valley and crop fields on hillsides in the distance, but the altitude is quite high, probably some 3000m. The mountain above the complex rises up at least another 400-500 m.

The place is under substantial construction and we climb up, wending our way through the buildings in various states of completion. There are large gilded Buddhas in some and monks living in others. It is very fancy and will be even fancier when finished.

Our guide has started to open up, telling us how the local people hate the central government and how the government controls them and their religion. There also was a lot of money either mismanaged or embezzled by the previous head of the temple project.

[to be continued]

Visiting Professorship Journal
(A travelogue mostly about living and eating in Beijing)

by
P.F. Uhler

Remote Sensing and Digital Earth Institute (RADI)
Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS)
Beijing, China
November 2, 2013 – January 3, 2014

November 2, 2013 – *Being There*

I leave at 1:20 p.m. on a direct flight from Dulles airport for Beijing. I am going for two months on a visiting professorship appointment at the RADI, CAS. November - December was the most opportune time period in my work at the National Academy of Sciences, but not so opportune in my personal life. I am getting divorced from Allison, selling our house and have an unsettled relationship with a new girlfriend. At least the divorce is now just a filing formality and the house preparations and sale are almost complete. I also had to get the house ready for sale and pack and move in a whirlwind, take care of setting up the payments for all the bills for two months, not to mention a lot of preparations at my job. And in October, I had trips to Wuhan and Santa Fe (in the 10 days immediately before this), and trips to NY to see my family and to LA with my girlfriend on the two weekends before that, so my life has been extremely hectic the past few months, to say the least.

I am going to be working with GUO Huadong, the director of RADI and the president of CODATA. He was also elected as Academician about a year ago, which is very big deal in China. I have known Huadong since 1992, when I first visited China and he was deputy director of the Institute of Remote Sensing Applications (see my Notes from Beijing in 1992). I am paid about 2/3 of my NAS salary, which is about half after taxes. Not bad, since I also am being paid my regular salary at my job in DC, mostly on vacation time.

Of course, I will be working with Huadong's colleagues at RADI and with others I know at other CAS institutes. My main collaborators include: LIU Chuang, from the Institute for Geographical Science and Natural Resources Research; MA Juncai, director of informatics at the Institute for Microbiology; LI Jianhui, deputy director of the Computer Network and Information Center and executive director of the Chinese National Committee for CODATA; CHEN Jun, director of the Geomatics Institute; GU Xingfa, S&T director of the city of Beijing; and many others. I know all these people well, many of whom are full professors, from my 18 trips here and we have met elsewhere, so I have more friends in this country than anywhere else, except in the U.S. I'm in good company and it promises to be a productive trip.

My proposed plan of activity is as follows:

1) Review of US Earth observation (EO) data policy. The US White House Office of Science and Technology Policy issued a new interagency EO strategy in April 2013. This part of the project will examine that strategy from the data policy perspective and also how it relates internationally, specifically with regard to the Group on Earth Observations.

- 2) Review of Chinese EO data policy. This part of the project will take a similar look at the Chinese EO approach to data availability, as agreed with the CAS RADI and MOST.
- 3) Draft a *Science* Journal Policy Forum article of scientific data policy. With Academician GUO Huadong of the CAS RADI, Prof. LIU Chuang of the CAS IGSNRR and CHEN Jun of the Geomatics Institute, I will work on writing and submitting an article on the history and direction of the Chinese data policy, particularly as it relates to global change research.
- 4) Work with LI Jianhui on an English version of the Chinese National Committee (CNC) for CODATA report on data intensive science. The CNC CODATA is almost finished with a study on data intensive science in China. There will be a short article from that study also translated into English and submitted to the CODATA Data Science Journal (DSJ). I will assist CNC CODATA and RADI, both of CAS, in preparing this article for publication in the CODATA DSJ.
- 5) Work on the international CODATA Task Group on Preservation of and Access to Scientific and Technical Data in Developing Countries (CODATA PASTD TG). The CODATA PASTD TG is organizing a workshop on scientific data preservation and access policy in Nairobi, Kenya next August. I will assist in the planning and preparation of this event with Prof. LIU Chuang of IGSNRR.
- 6) Work on the CODATA Task Group on Advancing Informatics in Microbiology (CODATA TG-AIM). I will assist Prof. MA Juncai of IMCAS, a co-chair of this CODATA Task Group, on the activities of the TG-AIM, as appropriate.
- 7) Work on the Digital Lin Chao Geomuseum with Prof. LIU Chuang of the CAS IGSNRR. We will work on the English version of the website and on promoting this online Geomuseum internationally.
- 8) Work on the CAS RADI Advisory Council issues. I am a member of the RADI Advisory Council and will work with Academician GUO Huadong and other colleagues at RADI on issues that are important to RADI.
- 9) Work on other CNC CODATA and international CODATA activities, as requested. I am the director of the US National Committee for CODATA (US CODATA) and therefore have an interest in cooperating with the CNC CODATA and the international CODATA, of which Academician GUO Huadong is President. We will work on issues of mutual interest that have not been specifically listed in the material above.

November 3 - Arrival

I arrive at PEK ahead of schedule, although I have the longest airplane taxi time (25 minutes) that I have ever experienced here. It reminds me of Charles De Gaulle airport, with the typical French gate delays. We also get a different arrival gate than usual, this one at the far end of the very large airport, and there are additional customs and baggage delays. It takes 1.5 hours to get to the other side, which is about twice as long as the norm.

The air is quite clean for Beijing—similar to a bad day in L.A.—and I can even see the mountains to the north of the city and some stars when night falls. I am met by LIU Chuang and a driver. They take me to the institute’s hotel, which will be my home for the next two months. The hotel is quite austere, though I have a large 2 room suite and the accommodation are adequate. I would peg it at a two-star place. I try out the internet and skype and I am relieved that they work very well. LIU Chuang is paying for the accommodations from one of her grants, so I have no complaints.

We eat in the institute’s cafeteria, which is in the building next door. It is not very good and since I will be eating there a lot for the next two months, I am rather bummed. Later I find out that it is the dinners, and especially the weekends, that are not as good. RADI is on the outskirts of the city, almost by the 6th ring road, so it is out in the boonies. I begin to plot my trips to civilization, but it won’t be easy.

It’s late fall and starting to get cold. The weather is similar to NY. I am told that the hotel does not turn on the heating system until mid-November, so it is rather chilly in my room.

I go to bed at 8, since I am tired, fully expecting to wake up in the middle of the night as I always do when I come here. Usually, I wake up at 2 a.m. the first night and this is no exception. At least I get six hours of good sleep and the bed is firm but comfortable.

November 4 – *Some reflections on the boob tube*

Since I have half the night to kill, I send a bunch of emails and make several calls on skype. I also watch some TV and start writing this journal. The TV, all in Mandarin, is nonetheless interesting. There is an English channel on the CCTV network, but it is not available at this hotel. I surf the channels and see: movies, a shopping network, talk shows, news, a music video channel, a cartoon channel, a variety show, and a sports channel.

The music video and sports channels are worth an extra comment. The music videos are weekly countdowns. They are very tame and remind me of Disney tween extravaganzas, with boy bands and romantic girls swooning. Everyone’s very good looking, but there is no violence, no sex, no narcissistic ugliness. It is vanilla entertainment, but the tradeoff is apparent.

The sports channel is a potpourri of programming. The first night I see some gymnastics, a snooker match, Brahma bull rodeo from Las Vegas and a belly dancing lesson by a Chinese woman in middle eastern dress. In subsequent days I see some sports highlights or whole matches—basketball, soccer, bicycle racing, tennis, ping pong, badminton, volleyball, snowboarding and, yes, the dreaded curling. An eclectic sports channel to say the least. But the most segments on any “sport”? Snooker!

In the days that follow I also observe a significant increase in military programming, both fiction and non-fiction. The latter includes interviews with military spokesmen, a showcase of arms systems and strategic discussions, mostly naval it seems. There are several such programs being shown simultaneously at any given time. A worrying sign of things to come?

I finish unpacking and get ready for the first day of work here. The shower in my bathroom does not have a tub, only two drains in the floor, but it is clean and functional. The morning is bright and the air is again on the clean side.

I meet CHEN Mingmei from the RADI International Cooperation Office in the hotel lobby at 8:30 and we go to the cafeteria to get some breakfast. This is simple fare and very high on carbs and fats, but quite tasty. I have a small fried bread (yes, I know) with some spring onion, a rice porridge, a boiled egg, some pickled veggies, and (not so) hot pepper flakes in oil. Everything is good except the porridge, which is very bland. Strangely, however, there is no tea, much less coffee. All in all a better experience than with dinner, so at least I can deal with that. We then go to my office and get oriented, meeting staff on my floor.

At 10:30 I meet with LIU Chuang to work on a workshop program we will be holding in Kenya in August 2014 for a CODATA Task Group on Access and Preservation of S&T Data in Developing Countries, and on the Digital Lin Chao Geomuseum. I am co-chair of the Kenya workshop and a member of the advisory board for the Digital Geomuseum.

After lunch I meet with several RADI staff to discuss my work agenda. I get very tired around 3 pm, however, and decide to go to the hotel. I fall asleep at 4:00 with a bad headache.

November 5 – *Getting oriented*

I get up again at 2:00 in the morning, and the headache is now worse, so after about 3 hours I go back to bed and sleep another 3 hours, but the headache is still there when I get up. I go to work late, after 10:00 am, and get some things done. I only eat fried rice for lunch, since I also am a bit queasy. I take a PM Ibuprofen, which makes me tired again, so I sleep another 2 hours after lunch in a chair in my office. I finish writing the Kenya announcement and a draft workshop agenda, however, so the day is not totally lost.

The headache is almost totally gone following the Ibuprofen and some more sleep, and I decide to take a walk in the immediate vicinity. I am in a large gated compound of CAS institute buildings, I am told. I walk out of the CAS campus onto a busy, but narrow, road that goes by many apartment high rises. It is quite apparent that the whole area was only recently built up, since there are many open spaces and unfinished building lobbies, garages, etc. However, it is about 95% complete and in pretty good shape, with nice sidewalks and paved roads.

I go around one of the apartment complexes. It is a large set of perhaps 15 20-story buildings. Not too far away, across a grassy field, is another similar group of apartment buildings. I am looking for shops and restaurants and find a small group on the other side of the apartment complex. There are a lot of fresh produce street vendors and a 2-block row of small shops and restaurants. Behind them are some run-down 2-story apartments, where I assume the shop keepers live. None of the stores appear interesting enough to enter, especially with my language barrier, so all I do is some window shopping. It's nice to know they're there however, since the whole area appears to be made up of work and apartment buildings.

I go back to the CAS campus and walk a bit around there before nightfall. There are some very large buildings close to my hotel. These include a half-dome structure, reminiscent of the wind-tunnel facility at the NASA Ames Center in California. It's well lit inside, but I don't know what it contains or what it's for. Next to it is a big building with about a dozen huge pipes on one side. It looks like a chemical factory, but it is not spewing anything and perhaps not yet operational. Hopefully it will stay that way. The other buildings appear to be labs and offices, including the one I work in.

There are a couple of empty lots that are surrounded by rusty metal fences. There is a faint whiff of chemicals as I walk by them and I wonder if they are toxic waste sites. It would not surprise me at all. Maybe that is why I am getting a bad headache. Or maybe it's the general air pollution, or the food, or the jet lag, or a lack of water, or all of the above.

I go to dinner around 6:00 and have some mystery steamed dumplings and a small bowl of some tofu and cabbage in a hot sauce. I put soy sauce and hot pepper on the dumplings and they are very good.

After dinner, I go to the small hotel store to buy some drinks and snacks for the inevitable long night. The last snacks were very bad. The Dove chocolates were OK, but the pistachios and especially the Pringle-style potato chips were a disaster. The latter were flavored with cucumber. I also could have gotten some meat flavored ones. Mmmm, tasty. I ate one of the cucumber flavored chips and threw them out.

This time, I get a frozen chocolate bar on a stick, a bag of peanuts in their shells, chocolate chip cookies and another water. The total comes to less than \$3. I go to my room around 6:40 and manage to stay awake until 8:15.

November 6 – *Some problems, great and small*

I am wide awake before 2:00 a.m., so I get up and get a lot of work done. I also surf the TV and write my journal entries. I eat some of the peanuts, which are quite dusty, even encased in their shells.

Food safety is something that I am always conscious about here. I eat almost everything, but stop if my taste buds raise a suspicion. A case in point was on my last United flight from Beijing, when I went to Wuhan the week before this long stay. On the final meal back they served an omelet breakfast with couple of packets of Chinese wafers and cookies. I opened one of the packages, which looked like two rice wafers drizzled with some icing. I think that they were rice wafers, but the icing was contaminated, either inadvertently or intentionally. The icing appeared to be some industrial solvent or pesticide or some such chemical, which tasted metallic, made my tongue burn and left a really unpleasant aftertaste for several hours, even though I just took one bite. I'm relieved that the effects weren't even more acute, but I read similar stories about adulterated foods here all the time.

Another concern is with the communicable microbial and viral diseases. This is the land of SARS, avian flu and a big AIDS epidemic, among a host of other problems. I see reference to the

deadly avian flu—H9F7—while switching TV channels. They have a segment on it, but all I can understand are the letters. I am definitely not paranoid and don't live in fear of this or that; instead I am quite adventuresome, but I consider myself prudently cautious, at least on the periphery. Later in this trip, I read in the *China Daily* about the first death from a new strain of avian flu, H9F10, in southern China. A 74 year old woman with a heart attack and other health conditions visited an outdoor market with live chickens, a common shopping experience in the smaller towns and cities I'm told, and she contracted the disease and succumbed. The article said it was not communicable between humans. Yet.

I also know the best doctors in Beijing from my earlier work here and have been at least tangentially in their health system. In the past I visited a private university dentist with a sore tooth, a private university clinic with a bout of the gout and a few pharmacies. The health system in Beijing is OK, but I would not want to get sick in the hinterlands. (See below about my two visits to hospitals here on this trip.)

Finally, there is the pollution and the environmental degradation, which I have already alluded to and to which I will no doubt return many times in my ensuing chronicles. I recently heard about “cancer villages” where almost everyone is wiped out due to the chronic ingestion of unbridled environmental contaminants.

It is another dry, sunny day. It is 7:00 a.m. and I can see the sun rising, an angry red in the grey haze. The pollution is bad, but not alarming. If it were really bad, I would not see the sun and there would be a very thick pall of pollution fog, obscuring everything and limiting visibility to about 100m or less. They used to say “The East Is Red”, but now it is just grey. It's not something that I need *The Economist* to tell me, even if they wrote it a few months ago.

After my nighttime work session I go to work at RADI. I get a lot done there too. LIU Chuang comes over in the afternoon to work on the Kenya workshop and another young colleague I know from their international office, ZHOU Xiang, comes over toward the end. They suggest that I go to a local mall, where I might do some shopping and eat at a real restaurant.

I take them up on their kind offer to drive me, but the mall is quite far. The mall is very modern, with a very nice supermarket, stores and restaurants. I do a lot of window shopping and end up going to a Chinese restaurant where I have a duck leg, sautéed eggplant and a couple of Budweisers. Thus fortified, I set out on the trek back.

I assume it will take about 45 minutes to walk back and think I know the way. It is really windy, with gusts exceeding 50 mph, I estimate. The wind whips up all the dust and leaves on the ground, and swirls them in mini-twisters. It would be really unpleasant if it were very cold, but the wind is part of a warm front, not a cold one, so it is not too bad. I go for about half an hour and then decide to take a short cut, ha ha. I walk down a local road for quite a while and don't find the road where I assume this must intersect and which is the final road I need to take. I later find out that if I had gone another couple of hundred meters I would have been almost to RADI.

I stop at a gate and guard post and show him where I am supposed to go. The guard motions me to wait while he calls a superior about what to do. What I found out on the way to the mall is

that this is a high security campus of the Chinese Academy of Space Technology, and that RADI is there as an add-on, not as the primary tenant. The complex is very big and it is also shared with the military. So the guard is understandably nervous about letting in a foreigner and wants to clear it first.

Fortunately, I have ZHOU Xiang's cell phone number and I give it to the superior officer when he arrives on a bicycle. He calls and confirms where I am heading. He tells me to get on the back of his bicycle, which has a very small metal platform in the back, probably for a small backpack, but is really not intended for a passenger. It is very uncomfortable, but I am grateful that he is pedaling the two of us to where I am going in a dust storm on a military post in a strange land where I don't speak the language. After about 10 minutes of this, we get to familiar territory and to my destination. I go to bed soon after that.

November 7 – *A day in the life*

I wake up about 3:00 a.m., an hour later than the previous days. Progress. I do a bunch of work. At 6:15 or so, the dawn arrives and it is a super clear day, the high wind having swept away all the crud. I make a bunch of calls on skype, including to Meimei, my girlfriend in Virginia, with whom I've re-established our relationship, I'm happy to say.

I spend all day in the office, working on NAS and CAS projects. I have a fairly light vegetarian lunch. I particularly like the sautéed garlic spinach. The hot cauliflower with pork is OK, but very oily, and the bok choy in some brown gook is passable.

At 5:30 I go with CHEN Mingmei to a dinner with my host, GUO Huadong, and a couple other RADI staff. It is a very fancy restaurant, not far from the Olympic park, and one of zillions in Beijing. We talk about my work agenda and life in general. My main assignment will be writing a study on comparing global earth observation data policies. The food is good and the people are very nice and accommodating.

I have a conference call from 10:00 to 11:00, so it is my opportunity to adjust my sleep, going to bed later and getting up later. I am on a CODATA Data Policy Committee, which is just being formed and I am discussing it with Mark Thorley, the committee chair in the UK, and Simon Hodson, the new executive director of CODATA in Paris.

The call goes on until 11:00, so I don't fall asleep until after that. I sleep until 5:00, so I am beginning to adjust to a normal schedule.

November 8 – *My first foray to the Olympic Park area*

I have an 8:30 meeting with a couple of research staff and Mingmei. It is in the RADI café, where they serve coffees and espressos. Yay. We go over the outline, the research resources and such. It should not be too difficult, but I will need some help with countries such as Russia, Japan and China.

After the meeting, I am informed that I should go to the southern island of Hainan, where RADI has a satellite campus in Sanya, China's southernmost city. They refer to it as the Hawaii of China, so it must be nice. There is a series of meetings there all next week on disaster mitigation and response, and the data required for that, as well as international cooperation. The meetings start on Tuesday, but I want to go Sunday so I can see something and relax in the tropics. I hope to have all day Monday to look around, but I am assigned to give an hour lecture that afternoon.

That afternoon I start working on the report and then go to meet Liu Chuang at her office overlooking the grounds of the Olympic Park, an area where I've been many times before, even before they started building the Olympic grounds. It was undeveloped open space—a rarity in Beijing—but “civilization” (aka the modern constructed environment) is slowly accreting. So much for the concept of open spaces. We continue working on the Kenya workshop plans and that looks good.

I go get a massage near on the other side of the Olympic grounds. It's a place I've been to before and the prices are reasonable—about \$26 for a 1-hour full body massage. I then meet her at the Crown Plaza hotel near the bird's nest stadium, where I want to go to a Brazilian *churrascaria*. I have already been there 3 times before and it is very good. They have substantially improved the salad bar and not raised the price. I also get a good caipirinha and some Australian cabernet to go with the grilled meats. Liu Chuang recounts her remote sensing data exploits and her travails in Beijing at CAS trying to convince everyone that the data should be made openly available. It is why I'm here and I want to work with her to make it happen. Progress has been slow, but there are signs of a thaw.

I take a taxi from the Crown Plaza to my hotel, which is a whole lot more convenient than the night before. I go to bed around midnight and wake up at 6:30, so I am on a normal schedule now.

November 9 – *Being hip in Beijing: District 798 and SanLiTun*

Today I want to go to the modern art area, District 798. I take a gypsy cab to the metro (the private cars are parked at all times of day outside the RADI gate) and it costs 20 RMB (\$3) to go to the metro. I take the metro (2 RMB, no matter how long the ride) from where I am, in the NW of Beijing to the NE. There is no metro directly at District 798, so I have to take another cab there. The whole trip is a little more than an hour.

The day is overcast, but not too cold or polluted. I find a great lunch spot in the middle of the District. The décor is SoHo-ish, with rustic brick walls and industrial accents. There is really good jazz playing. The BBC is on a wide screen TV. Several copies of the week's International NY Times (the old International Herald Tribune until about a year ago) are available in the corner. They have a sushi room, a café, outdoor seating (too cold for that) and a really great bar. The menu is terrific.

The manager of the place is behind the bar and runs a tight ship. He speaks really good English. I find out he's from Ulaan Bataar and he's surprised that I've been there. They have a nice wine list and I order a Norton Malbec, a Perrier, and a butternut squash and sweet potato soup. The

theme of the month is pomegranate, and the soup comes flecked with pomegranate and pumpkin seeds and a generous dollop of crème fraîche. The soup is exquisite and I am very happy. I get a newspaper and watch the typhoon wreak havoc in the Philippines on the tube.

After the soup I decide to have a burger made with Aussie beef on a whole grain bun that the manager says they bake there every morning. The burger is stuffed with Meyer lemon butter. Australian grass-fed steaks are also available, but it would be over the top for lunch, especially after the churrascaría the night before. The burger comes out medium rare, with some *alumettes* and a small salad of mesclun greens in a light vinaigrette. The ketchup is in a little dish on the side. I order a glass of Santa Rita *reserva* cabernet sauvignon, recalling fondly a couple of great lunches that Alex, Jeff and I had at the Santa Rita vineyard restaurant in Chile a couple of years back. I read the rest of the week's copies of the newspaper and finish the repast with a really good cup of coffee—one of the best regular coffees I've ever had.

I am more than content and I tell the Mongolian manager that he has a world-class establishment and he nods in accord as a matter-of-fact. I tell him that I'll be back and I mean it.

I hit the streets and all the galleries and stores. It's a lot of fun. They're eclectic, high quality and interesting. A lot of the art is contemporary, with veiled political statements. Children leading the masses. Grotesque caricatures of rich people. A mosaic made of pictures of human skulls. A statue of a headless commissar with right hand raised to the masses and the left hand cradling his beret. The iconic statue for the District is the screaming man, larger than life in red plastic, with the body streamlined as if wrapped tightly in a sheet or a strait jacket, leaning slightly forward. Those statues are everywhere on the sidewalks, larger than life.

But there also are more traditional art forms as well as pottery, glass, interior design, sculpture (both on the street and in the galleries), jewelry and clothing. There are many cafes in keeping with the tastes of the western clientele, an artisanal Belgian chocolate shop, a wine store, and other restaurants and street food. There are musicians and other street vendors, and fashion models and wedding couples in outdoor photographic shoots.

The pedestrians are also worth watching. I talk with one wearing the new Google glasses. He is a software developer with Google. Apparently, the glasses are still in beta production and cost \$1500 for a custom pair. He really likes them and they will be substantially cheaper when mass-marketed.

I go into an Umbrian delicatessen to get a small scoop of chocolate gelato. Later, I step inside a North Korean store that's mobbed. Some pretty decent stuff, but the staff there is sullen. Perhaps they see all these people and the freedom in Beijing and are reminded that the DPRK is one big, hideous lie. Or maybe they are true believers and so brainwashed that they are totally turned off by what they see. Or maybe their lives are shattered and they are despondent by nature. Whatever it is, I'll be damned if I buy anything at that store.

I come across an establishment, Yuanfen Flow, with some tables set out as art works and others set for eating. How clever. It turns out to be more of a consulting business than a restaurant or a gallery, but so what? I speak with a guy who is at the juice bar and he turns out to be an

American lawyer who has lived in Beijing for 25 years. His business card says he is David Ben Kay, a former Microsoft GC. He teaches a course in privacy law at a local university. He is very interested in my work and we chat for quite a while. I then talk with the chef, who is American as well. He tells a story about buying some 160 hot sauces from around the world at a place in Hong Kong. He says that one of the concoctions was so hot that a toothpick dipped in it flavored a big pot of stew spicy. In any case, I will be back on another visit to talk with them some more.

After three hours of walking around I have had enough and I leave at dusk and go to SanLiTun. I go there because (a) I can pronounce it; (b) every taxi driver knows where it is; (c) there is a metro station there; and (d) I know that there are all kinds of restaurants there (I won't stick around for the fast nightlife). SanLiTun is the original sin district of Beijing, before Beijing became libertine and sin was everywhere.

I visited there 10 years earlier. Wow, it sure has changed. Gone are all the hawkers and pimps (at least from one side of the street!), the low-class and seedy atmosphere mixed in with the embassies and diplomats. We enter and drive down SanLiTun Street, which is lined now with super expensive stores, like Versace and Hermes, and gleaming steel and glass structures. It is dripping with money. He drops me off in front of some dance and night clubs, which are still there, but empty at this hour. The cross street is a big boulevard that is packed with locals and tourists.

Across the street in the distance, I see some lights of a place I think I remember, but it is now partially obscured by a driveway to a garage below a high-rise office building. I turn left instead, down the boulevard, and see a new gated residence for diplomats and several Middle Eastern restaurants that weren't there before. The only establishment I recognize is a live rock music club that I actually did visit before and that has somehow survived the onslaught of big money. I go a fair distance down to the next corner, which is where I find the metro station for later reference, so I decide to go back to where I saw the lights earlier on the other side.

Sure enough, after I pass through the garage drive-through, I come across another club zone where I spent some time a decade ago. Everything has been upgraded, though, except for one Latino disco that looks familiar. I recall that I had a lousy mojito there. I see some other restaurants and very chic night clubs that probably host very expensive call girls. An Irish bar across the way has a prominent sign saying NO DRUGS. I walk another block and see two restaurants -- a Chinese and Mexican one. I go to the Chinese one first and use my sign language for seeing a menu, but he points to the Mexican place next door and I take the hint. I was going to go there anyway.

It looks promising. I sit at the bar and both the drink and the food menus have a lot of nice choices. I order a caipirinha, which is quite good. It turns out that the guy sitting next to me is the husband of the owner, a Chinese woman. He is also a lawyer, educated at Yale and speaks fluent Mandarin, having learned it before he went to law school. Mike Dardzinsky is his name. He has lived in Beijing for 15 years. He started his own law reference business, which he sold to West Law, and is now about to launch an online mid-career business educational and training service. We talk about our work interests and he seems genuinely interested in what I do.

Being the husband of the proprietor has its advantages. One of them is knowing what to order. He suggests the rib rack with a dry rub. He says it is delicious and it is. I also have a guacamole and *pico de gallo*, both of which are serviceable (and which he didn't mention), and real chips (not Chinese knock offs). I also order a couple different margaritas, which are OK. I don't have dessert, but a cortado coffee---the Mexican equivalent of an espresso---which is excellent, and since he has a big selection of tequilas, I get a shot of Patrón *aneho* as a nightcap. That drink is free---another advantage of conversing with the owner's spouse. I give Mike my email address and he says he wants to have dinner with me and some of his friends to talk about space law and common-use licensing, two of the topics I brought up in our far-ranging conversation.

Not bad for a day off bumming around in a foreign land...

November 10 – *Le soleil brie*

I am supposed to travel to Sanya this morning. The sun is shining and it is super clear, but it is very windy and cold as my driver picks me up at 7:30 a.m. I get to the airport in record time and get my ticket in 2 minutes flat. The guy at the counter looks like he is trying to break some speed record for processing customers. I think he is succeeding and moreover he does it with a smile. China is great when the hordes are not present, but that rarely happens, except in expensive places, and even that is no guarantee any more.

I go through security, which is a big mistake because there is nothing on the other side, including heat. I have only a shirt on, expecting to arrive in the tropics soon, a decision I am about to rue the rest of the day.

I wait in the cold about 45 minutes and then go out to a waiting bus in the real cold. I am ferried, Beijing driver style, to the plane and get on as fast as I can in the blustery wind. I anticipate the ensuing liftoff, but after sitting on the tarmac about 15 minutes, we are told to disembark. Apparently, the typhoon Haiyan that hit the Philippines a day earlier has now made it to Hainan and the airport in Sanya has closed. I brave the frigid air in the cold sunshine and am ignominiously returned to the terminal.

It turns out that there are two ladies from Kazakhstan who are going to the same meetings I am going to in Sanya and they introduce themselves to me on a hunch, since I am the only Westerner in the bunch. I try out my rudimentary Russian on them and they are duly impressed. We muddle through customs and the ticket counter. The airline is nice enough to send anyone who is interested to an airport hotel, about 20 minutes away by shuttle bus.

The hotel has seen better days, but the room is warm and has an internet connection, so I am reasonably content. I have the room to myself but a little while later, they pair me up with another guy, who is affable but speaks little English. Hey, beggars can't be choosers. It is almost lunch time so I go to a buffet downstairs, which is OK.

On the way out of the dining room I am approached by what looks like a 5-year-old. He has great self-awareness, speaks very good English and shows me his school workbook, which has his English lessons. They are written in penmanship that an adult would envy. He wants me to ask

him questions in English, but I am not prepared for the presence of this apparent genius. After a few inane queries, he leaves with his grandfather, who appears to be justifiably proud of his little prodigy.

There is a wedding party at the hotel and a lot of noise. My hotel room overlooks an inner courtyard where there are about 100 guests and an MC with a microphone. The merriment is deafening. I try to sleep, but after a few more minutes the phone rings and we are summoned to the shuttle van to go back to the airport.

I take this as an auspicious sign, only to find out that the purpose is to pick up the luggage and get a ticket to travel to Sanya on another day. All remaining flights that day to Sanya have been cancelled. By the time I get my luggage and have figured this out, long lines for booking a new itinerary have formed and I am stuck waiting my turn. If only I had my smart phone, I may have booked the next flight before I got to the counter, although that might be a stretch on Hainan Airlines. Moreover, some PuShi Chinese cut in line in front of me, despite the protests from those already waiting, and I certainly don't want to make a scene. By the time I get my turn all the remaining seats on the Monday flights are taken, so I book the same flight two days hence and extend my trip there one day to Sunday. It is actually a better itinerary, since I have all of Saturday to myself.

I decide to take the high-speed train from the airport, which I have not done before. It only costs \$4 and takes about 15 minutes to connect to several metro lines in the NE corner of the city. I pay another 2 RMB to take the metro to near where I am staying and then take a gypsy cab back to RADI (I have memorized the location in Chinese—hong tien jun—as well as the way to go there). By the time I get back it is 5 p.m. and the entire day has been wasted, first with cold, then aggravation, and finally ground travel. I decide to assuage my bad day with a high-class repast at the Crowne Plaza hotel (which I find out is now called the V-Continental Hotel), as I go back out into the cold.

At this point I need to digress to write about the truly impressive metro system in Beijing. I have taken subways throughout the world. I can recall riding the subways in many cities, most multiple times, including in Boston, New York, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco, London, Prague, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Munich, Kyiv, Moscow, Santiago, Rio, Tokyo, Kyoto, Shanghai, and here: enough for purposes of comparison. I like almost all the metro systems outside the U.S. better than at home, mostly because they are cleaner, cheaper, generally more ubiquitous and more efficient. Even the old ones in Europe work better. The ones in China are superlative, however, partly because they have been built the most recently, but also because of other features.

I like the Beijing system best for a lot of reasons. There are 15 lines that go just about everywhere. It is easy to use, with good bilingual instructions in English, including in clear, spoken form. It is bright and clean, even though it is used by zillions of people every day. It is safe, not only because there is little crime, generally, but because there is a video camera on every car and in every station (and everywhere else). People are polite and helpful, although they are very PuShi getting on and off when crowded.

The stations are also very friendly to blind people, with ridged rubber tiles that lead the blind everywhere and tiles with raised dots that tell them to stop. Along with the spoken announcements in two languages, the blind cannot get lost. In fact, the ridged rubber tiles are in place on every new sidewalk and all the lights have ticking sounds that tell them when to go, when it's time to watch out and when to stop. However, I see no blind people anywhere. I presume they have all been run over in the undisciplined traffic ;-)

November 11 – *Some thoughts on society*

Since this is an unplanned day at the RADI office and most of my colleagues left for Sanya on Saturday, before the typhoon, it is quiet and I get a lot of work done, including the writing of this journal. I also make a lot of calls on Skype. The only activity worth mentioning is that I take the metro again to the Olympic Park area to have dinner at TGI Friday's, where I go to have my fix of Western food before the trip to Sanya.

However, because this is a brief entry, I would like to take the opportunity to comment on some personal gestures. I know this is some stereotyping, but it is mostly very positive, so get over it. I am told that the Chinese build business and professional contacts and cooperation based on social relationships. That is why there is so much wining and dining before the actual work relationship becomes serious (see also my notes on corruption, below). At the same time, they can be very reserved in public and the women are especially shy. Everyone is deferential and polite, except in large crowds, where people get very PuShi, and in traffic, where might makes right and it is every driver to himself (see my Notes from Lijiang). They are especially friendly and curious about foreigners, especially out of the big cities where foreigners are not very common.

Another seemingly pervasive national trait is Type-A impatience. I see it in elevators, where everyone always pushes the close door button when someone gets off, apparently to save the two seconds. But come to think of it, there are other very well-known examples. One is that every Chinese restaurant will bring out a dish as soon as it is cooked, rather than cooking them in proper sequence so that, say, the appetizers arrive before the main courses, or the main courses don't arrive when you have just started to eat the appetizer. Time is of the essence and the food must get out fast. Food is also chopped up into bite-sized chopstick-friendly pieces, so that there is no time wasted by the diner in cutting anything. Also, I now realize that this trait is probably why cars merging into traffic never wait for a break in the traffic or for a driver in the main line signaling that you can go ahead. The cars merging universally barge straight ahead, never waiting for anything. It is like queuing at the metro or in other crowded places,

I am keeping track of small gestures here in Beijing this time and will put them all here, despite their having occurred at different times. In metros, I was approached two times already about whether I am lost or needed help, even though I was not all that lost to begin with. A housekeeper walking ahead of me at my hotel pressed the elevator button for me even though she was taking the stairs. The staff at restaurants, hotels and most stores is very efficient, friendly and smile a lot. I have people say nihow out of the blue when walking past me on the street or in the metro.

A young woman offered me a seat on the metro. I don't know if it's because I'm a foreigner or because I look old and decrepit. I would like to think it's the former, but it's probably both. If it's the latter, it would be the first time...

My friends and acquaintances always pay the bill when we go out to eat. Even though when I ask they tell me that they are fully reimbursed from their jobs, it makes me feel welcome. Moreover, their employers do not have to make the money available, just like they typically don't in the U.S. They also give gifts when visiting me in Washington or sometimes when I come to a meeting or dinner here.

These are all traits (except the crowds and the extreme Type-A behavior) that make me really like this culture and society, and why I like to visit here.

November 12 – *My trip to Sanya and getting oriented there*

I get up at 5:30 to check my emails and get ready for a 7:00 pick-up for a return to the airport. It is still clear, having been pretty much devoid of pollution since Saturday, when high winds started up again. However, one can see the crud starting to build up on the horizon.

It takes about 15 minutes longer to get to the airport than on Sunday morning, so it's not too bad. I decide to have breakfast before I go through security. I order a fried egg, steamed buns with vegetables, and oolong tea. There is a hot pepper sauce on the table, similar to the one at the RADI cafeteria, but considerably spicier and more flavorful. I like everything, except the buns are filled with mystery meat, something like pork lung, and not vegetables as advertised. I slather them with the hot sauce, but I can only stomach three of the four buns. It is also a bit of a challenge eating a fried egg with chop sticks.

After breakfast I go to get a mocha at the coffee shop I went to on Sunday, partly because I need to wake up and partly to get the taste of the bun filling out of my mouth. I should have gone there in the first place. The subsequent trip through security and to the plane is uneventful, although they check you thoroughly with a metal detector each time. The plane is filled to capacity, no doubt with some of the overflow from all the cancelled flights on Sunday.

After flying over four hours, I arrive in Sanya on time. The city is at the latitude of Rangoon, well below that of Hanoi. It is very tropical and the closest foreign country is Vietnam. Sanya has a population of about 700,000, so it is roughly the size of DC. My ride is not there, so I go to the Tourist Information counter to get written instructions in Chinese for the hotel address. At first they have trouble finding it, but after some time they locate it online.

The taxi line is long and it is rather hot and muggy. The people at the Info desk said a taxi would cost about 30 RMB. I am approached by a gypsy cab and offered a ride for 100 RMB, which I decline. Another guy soon comes up and offers a ride for 70. I counter with 50 and he declines. I look at the long line and the heat and about 2 minutes later I accept his offer. The \$6 difference is worth it, even though I'm taking a chance. I'm not worried about the crime angle, just the language barrier, but he finds the hotel in about 15 minutes.

The Bihailou Hotel is on the beach on the far west end of Sanya Bay, but the reason that the Info Desk people could not find it is that it's not a typical tourist hotel—it is owned and on the grounds of an army compound! It is thus part of a military installation, although you would not know it by the looks of it. The only thing that gives it away are the military checkpoints at the entrances to the grounds, but no one there even takes a second glance, much less checks any IDs. I find that to be the case at almost all the government facilities in China. The guards are very laid back and unobtrusive. Contrast that to the rabid and highly expensive security apparatus at all the government institutions, even mundane ones, in the U.S.

The Bihailou is definitely a 4-star hotel, with very clean, marble décor, nicely appointed rooms reminiscent of a hotel I stayed at on the Gold Coast in Oz, a pool, restaurant, shops, meeting facilities, and access to the beach and ocean. On one side is a Holiday Inn Resort (touted on TripAdvisor as “the best value in Sanya”, which sounds like a planted review) and on the other is a multi-block place called the Palm Beach Resort. The area is on the far west side of the horseshoe-shaped Sanya Bay, with a large expanse of hotels and other high rises visible across the entire city from my 13th floor balcony. [Note: in the US, there is often no 13th floor because of superstition; here there is no 14th floor for the same reason.] There is even a huge and modern Howard Johnson's Resort (I didn't know it even still existed, although there are other bankrupt chains, like Woolworth's, that are still operating in Asia). Other chains here include the Ritz-Carlton (listed as #1 on the TripAdvisor site, which I do believe), the Conrad, le Meridien, a Sheraton, etc. The Bihailou is rated #368 out of more than 900 listed in Sanya, although I suspect that it is rated quite low because of its incognito status, rather than its real place in the pecking order of accommodations.

After unpacking and getting a little oriented, I go to a CODATA Disaster Data workshop. It is one hour from the end, so I miss most of it, lucky me. I am welcomed profusely and am there just in time for a break, so I go to the beach to see how the ocean is. Apart from the damage to some vendors on the shoreline, the beach is quite nice and the water is warm. We take the obligatory group photo and I beg off on the group dinner, which is too early, and decide to go to town on my own instead.

I get a taxi and set out on about a 45-minute trek around the bay. We pass a lot of street vendors first, selling clothing and then fruits and cooked street food. We then enter a very long stretch of built up beachfront hotels on the left, and a promenade and then beach on the right. It is a famous wedding and honeymooning place, so there are some weddings, with folk dancing and ceremonies outside, even if it is the middle of the week. There is some damage from the recent typhoon (downed trees, small flooding), but a lot more ongoing street construction, so a lot of the way is very dug up and the going is very slow. It is OK, because I am in no hurry and it provides me with an opportunity to take it all in.

After about ½ hour of this, we enter a new zone of mostly restaurants, some shops and residences, so I decide to get out and walk the rest of the bay area. Sanya is famous for its seafood, so I look at the tanks of live critters, mostly shellfish and large crustaceans. I go to the end of the strip, which terminates by a bridge that goes to a small island with some very impressive oval high-rise apartment buildings and a small port with some local cruise ships. There is a big and busy seafood restaurant there, so I decide to try it.

I view the rather depleted tanks and get some large prawns, 3 each of two kinds, a chicken soup with bok choy and a bottle of beer. Not very much food and it sets me back about \$40. The prawns are fresh and good, but I've had bigger, better and cheaper prawns at the Meridien seaside resort in Dakar, Senegal, where I've stayed 3 times before.

After dinner, I decide to walk back towards the Bihailou, although I am under no illusion that I will actually walk all the way. It is probably a 10-mile hike. I migrate a couple of streets inland from the beach, which turns out to be a very busy, commercial boulevard. It reminds me of Taipei. I enter a clothing store and they want over \$130 for a short-sleeved shirt, but for me, only \$100. Sure. After about 45 minutes of that I run out of new things to see, so I take a cab back. The traffic is a lot less crowded, but the meter is much pricier at this hour, which is about 9:30 in the evening. The meter jumps at seemingly random increments, but I don't have the wherewithal to find out why this is so and it is still quite cheap—less than \$10.

After taking a quick shower and checking my e-mails I go to bed around 10:30. I get about 8 hours of sleep, which surprises me since the bed is very hard and the air is rather hot and muggy.

November 13 – *A long day of work in Sanya*

After a rather mediocre breakfast that had a surprising lack of fruits, which are very plentiful, cheap and delicious here, I go to another workshop, this one further west out of town. The dearth of fresh fruit at breakfast, a ubiquitous staple here, is inexplicable and reminds me of the same situation at a hotel in Havana a few years back. I suppose all the managers think of it only in their own terms and daily experience, and they view fruit as nothing special, but it is just bad management.

I go out of town with a driver to the RADI satellite campus. It is nice, but I am glad I am not staying there because it is very isolated. On the way out of town, we go past a lot of one, two, and even three-story single-family residences. Most of them have balconies on the upper floors, evocative of a colonial past or at least an architecture that's been influenced by it. The people are Chinese, but you can see a strong Vietnamese influence and even some indigenous islander features. The people are very attractive.

The other thing that one notices everywhere are the scooters, much like I saw in Taiwan. (It's not politically correct to say "Taiwan" in mainland China, so I call it "the country formerly known as China", in tribute to *Prince*, who had the same proprietary naming problem but in a different context.) The scooters are the low-cost transport of choice in the warm south. Because they are competing for space on the roads with the cars, buses and trucks, they provide an added element of danger (mostly to themselves) in an otherwise already cacophonous and crowded situation. My driver, like most drivers, is very PuShi and beeps his horn a lot. It's probably good that the scooters and others know that they are being approached from behind, but it is annoying nonetheless. The driver beeps one more time for good measure as we enter the RADI compound.

I spend the whole day at an IRDR meeting. IRDR is the "Integrated Research on Disaster Risk" center, a non-governmental organization. It is co-located with RADI in Beijing, and is affiliated

with the International Council for Science (ICSU) in Paris. I am here because I have an interest and expertise in data issues, although I don't know much about disaster data per se. It is nonetheless a good excuse to go to Sanya this week.

I have lunch and dinner at the RADF and it confirms what I have observed at other government institutes I have eaten at before. That is, they generally have the best cooking in China, except at the highest-end hotels and restaurants (I mean five star). For example, one of the dishes at lunch is the very large prawns with garlic. It is about the same as what I had the night before, but it did not cost \$5 a pop! Many of the dishes are really good and very have different flavors. I also sit lunch with senior IRDR scientists from all over the world, including the Philippines, Italy, Japan, UK, NZ and China, so the conversation is excellent as well.

At 19:30 I give an hour presentation on the international data sharing work of the Group on Earth Observations, for which I am a co-chair. I give the lecture to a room full of young scientists from the region, who are here for training in the use of remote sensing data for disaster mitigation. There are a lot of good questions at the end and my talk is well received, so it is not a waste of time.

I get back to the hotel around 21:00 and go to the only open restaurant, a Russian one, which serves food and drink on a patio al fresco. The clientele is mostly Russian and the staff is Chinese who speak Russian. The menu is in Russian as well, so I get to practice the language. I can get by. I am not hungry, but I am curious and I order a Russkiy shashlik (skewer of grilled pork), some potato fries and a TsingTao beer. The food is mediocre but the ambiance is better and, hey, how often do I get to practice Russian, especially in China? The restaurant staff are setting the place up for music and dancing, but I go to bed after a very long day.

November 14 – *Animal (House, Farm, Planet)*

There is nothing very interesting today, except more IRDR meetings and work. We were warned the day before that they would be spraying the grounds outside with pesticide and I could sure smell the aromatic hydrocarbons upon arrival. There are skeets around and I wonder for the first time whether to worry about malaria, but no one says anything and I don't ask.

We end the day with a big banquet on the lawn of the institute, which features a barbeque, a hot and cold buffet, and lots of TsingTao beer. Unfortunately, the banquet isn't nearly as good as the earlier meals, but it is fun nonetheless and the company is good. We also have local entertainment in the form of some female dancers, who are not very interesting, but get an A for effort. Some of them look like they are made of rubber. I end the day at the hotel doing my banking from half way around the world.

Since this is a short entry, I want to muse a bit about what I have observed about the Chinese culture and the relationships with animals. If the Europeans tax anything that moves and the Americans kill anything that moves, the Chinese eat anything that moves. Animals, and I mean all animals, are looked at as food. I have seen it all and eaten more than I should. I've had camel (I chewed a bite for five minutes and ultimately spit it out); cold sliced donkey (several times); duck tongues and duck feet (not good); some very small and bony pieces of mammal disguised

in a pot with sauce that my host encouragingly called chicken (not bad); jellyfish (like eating strips of plastic); sea cucumber (truly hideous to look at); frog fat (!) that I didn't realize until afterward; and parts unknown. I've seen menu items or outdoor stands with various insects and grubs roasted on small sticks, fresh snake blood (on Snake Alley in Taipei), dog (still on hotel menus in 1992 and most likely still on some restaurant menus), duck heads and fish heads (very common), and my "favorite" treat found all over western China, caterpillar fungus. I'd like to see Andrew Zimmern stomach all of THAT! And one time in 1999, when I was drinking beers with some Europeans at CERN, one of them told me that there was a culinary trade in aborted human fetuses. Whether apocryphal or not, the tragic moral of this disgusting factoid is that I can believe it.

The fact that animals are seen as food is probably why there seem to be so few pets or animals in the wild. That, and the severe pollution. Meimei told me that there are no birds in Beijing and it's true I haven't seen any until this time, when I saw a few in the boonies on the northern outskirts. I've also seen very few dogs in the past anywhere in China, except again this time in Beijing when I've noticed quite a few. Maybe dogs as pets (as opposed to as dishes) are making a comeback. I do know that there is a very expensive annual license fee and you can only register small ones (lunch-size), but I actually saw someone with a golden retriever (banquet-size) in the north part of town. In any case, I do not miss the pigeon shit or doggie doo obstacle course on the sidewalks. Nor are there any insects anywhere to be seen, now that I think of it, though the causes of this are murky to me and I would rather not think about it.

When I was in Wuhan in October this year, my student guide and I came across a guy with some pet monkeys doing tricks on the street for a donation. I'll call him "monkey man" for short. I think he had some macaques—one adult and two kids—who were on chains. They did a little show mostly fetching items like a hat and mimicking what the monkey man did. He thought it was amusing being cruel to the monkeys and threatening them all the time. I really didn't want to watch this "entertainment", but I thought it would be amusing if the monkeys turned the tables on the monkey man and beat him up or got away somehow.

The only other animals I have seen have been in the countryside—cows, sheep, yaks, horses—and I know that they grow other domesticated animals such as chickens, ducks, pigs and goats. Of course, the animal farms are also a source of diseases—think avian flu or the ten thousand dead pigs recently floating in the -- River through the middle of Shanghai.

There also are the endangered species in the wild, some of which are reprehensively looked at as medicine—rhinoceros horns and tiger testicles as traditional Viagra. At a food and craft store that I stopped at going from Xining to QingHai Lake in QingHai Province, I saw a whole row of dried yak dicks in cellophane packages, ostensibly for the same reason.

Finally, there is the soft side of the relationship with some animals. Pandas are the national animal and are roundly fawned over. Crickets are the pet of choice, especially in the south, though hardly a cuddly critter. But the non-culinary animal that everyone likes is of the stuffed variety. Or in fur hats. ;-0

But on the Beijing metro one day I did see a segment (there are LCD TVs on all the station platforms and by each subway car door) on the controversy of wearing furs. I could hardly believe it. Maybe they were making fun of the people wanting fur banned.

November 15 – *Sanya bei Nacht*

It is the last day of the IRDR meetings, with some high-profile speakers and presentations in the morning and breakout sessions in the afternoon. The talks are pretty good, but I get a lot of work done on my laptop, multitasking. Lunch is outstanding. Most of the Beijing people leave late that afternoon and our bus leaves for the hotel around 16:30.

I decide to explore the west side of Sanya this time and I set out by foot in order to see more. As I noted before, the Bihailou hotel is on the far west end, so it is about 1 km through some of the less ritzy hotels and high-rise apartments before I get into the thick of things. There is construction everywhere, like in all of China, and especially on the road closest to the bay. I go past lots of putt-putts, my term for the ubiquitous tricycle scooter cabs that are congregated on most corners. I expect them to be PuShi, trying to get a fare, but there's nary a peep. I doubt this is cultural and assume that there is some draconian municipal edict that forbids them from soliciting, probably in response to complaints from higher ups.

It is about 18:15 and the sun is setting as I enter the zone where all the street vendors line the roadway. First are clothing racks and then the fresh produce. Behind them are small shops that are not very interesting. I see my first 5-star hotel, so I go inside because I need to find a cash machine. It's a Chinese hotel mostly for Chinese tourists and no one speaks English. I am generally not used to this, but I am off the beaten path here, even if it is becoming a tourist mecca.

I walk around the cavernous grounds and it is quite nice, with a lot of amenities. It borders in the back by the beach, but it is almost deserted. I decide to see what they have at the bar. I am the only customer, so I feel somewhat awkward: an alcohol drinking westerner in a teetotaling land (but see below).

I peruse the drink menu and notice what appears to be a dark beer made on the premises. Fortunately, just about every hotel and restaurant in any large city in China has a picture menu, with most also translated into English, sometimes amusingly (see my much earlier notes from China, especially from 1992). So I order the dark beer—and a microbrew to boot! I cannot pass this up. Although I have had local beers in a number of Chinese cities, they are all basically the same—light lagers that are indistinguishable and undistinguished. The only mass-produced beer that has a modicum of flavor is TsingTao, but even that is not very good.

I point to the item and the waitress makes a phone call. After a few minutes of waiting (I am the only customer, so it heightens the wait) she makes another call. Soon after, a young man appears, carrying large metal bowl with the precious liquid inside. The bar maid gets another, smaller bowl and scoops the foam off the top and then scoops the beer into a mug and serves it. There's a first time for everything. She pours the remainder into a glass pitcher, no doubt hoping I would

order more. I taste the beer and it is a stout, with a decent head and body. I like the first few sips, but about half way through I find it to be quite sour. Ah well.

I go outside again into the balmy evening and walk further east. I am now in the middle of the famous section of town that has a lot of outside seafood eateries. I even saw reference to this on the internet, so I know it must be true ;-). There are a few dozen street stands, many of which have outdoor seating in the back. There is a variety of seafood and even some meat, plus what looks like a very fresh and clean assortment of veggies. These are all bar-be-queued right there on wood chip flames and the aroma is very tempting. I am still not hungry and want to see what else there is, but I would not hesitate to eat the fare—even if it is street food—at least early in the evening when the catch is still fresh. I have my doubts though about the seafood items later on that all sit around unrefrigerated.

I walk slowly down the street, taking in the smells, sights and sounds. It is a good experience, despite the very heavy traffic crawling and honking among all the pedestrians. I stop at a general store, since I need some sunblock for the tour tomorrow. It is a lot cheaper than at the hotel—35 RMB versus more than a couple hundred. It is a small tube of Olay, a well-known European brand, but I strongly suspect it's another knock-off. Not only is it too cheap, but the SPF on the few boxes on the shelf is all different—"32", "34", and "37"—even though they all look the same. I buy the one with the highest SPF, but I'm sceptical.

I turn the corner onto the boulevard by the sea, which is much less crowded. The street vendors are only on the side of the street away from the water and start to thin out after a couple of blocks. After that, it is just a strip of hotels and high rises again.

About another half km ahead I see a massive complex with lights, so I decide that this will be the turn-around point. It is the Sonic Ocean Resort. It is huge and very classy, most definitely 5-star caliber no matter where you are. There are perhaps 6 large oval buildings, with very large grounds, restaurants and shops. It is apparently a chain, all Chinese, with both apartments to buy and rent (time share?).

I walk around and visit a party room on the 11th floor of one building and a casino in the basement. The party room turns out to be a space for rent and there is nothing going on. The casino offers blackjack, roulette and some other games I don't know. It is deserted, but still early—perhaps 20:00—and they tell me that it does not start to fill up until around 22:00. The minimum entry fee is 1000 RMB, which is getting pricey but not too bad. The actual casino is separated from the front desk by a glass wall and there is a sign that says that the establishment is not for gambling. I guess it's to skirt the law. You pay the fee outside and then you get chips with which to bet on the casino side. It looks good, but I would be the only customer, so I decide that I might go there the next day.

I go to a bar by a fancy buffet restaurant and again I am the only patron. I order a Long Island Iced Tea and it is really good. After getting some literature for Meimei to look over, I decide it is time for dinner. I had passed a large open-air restaurant on the sea-side, so I figure this is a good compromise between the hotel and the street food. Wrong.

I am seated toward the back next to two tables of 10 each of very inebriated partyers. Most of them are drunk, having already been through some bottles of liquor and red wine. They are continually toasting each other and playing drinking games. I assume that at some point they will turn their attention to me, but they leave me alone.

I order sauteed hot peppers, some local fresh greens called “revolutionary” something or other, and tender beef with green onion. Sounds promising, but unfortunately it’s not. The service is lousy— uncharacteristically in this country—and the food is also mediocre, swimming in oil. I eat some and have a local beer with it, but I am disappointed that I didn’t eat either at the hotel or at the street stands. I go to the bathroom and not only is it filthy, but there is not even a sink.

I trod back the 2 km or so to the Bihailou.

November 16 – *Journey to the End of the Earth*

I have been to a lot of places in my life, but I waited almost 60 years to get to the end of the Earth. I’ve been to Land’s End in SW England (near Penzance and Mousehole) and the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, where the Indian Ocean “meets” the Atlantic, but it is not every day that one goes to a place that proclaims it is the “End of the Earth” (loosely translated from the Chinese, I’m told).

It is actually an island apart from the island I am on, Hainan. Since it is south of Hainan, it is the southernmost point of China, and hence the end of the Earth. Somehow, I suspect that there are other Chinese islands that are even further south (or ones that they intend to appropriate!), but it makes for a good story, just like the Cape of Good Hope is actually a bit further north than Cape Elisabeth. Savvy marketing.

I also have been to a few islands off islands. The first of these was in my childhood in Manhattan. We used to play kickball and capture the flag on Randall’s Island when I was in grade school. Don’t ask me why, but it was fun. And, no, I didn’t do time on Riker’s. I also recall taking a boat to a small island off the NW coast of Trapani, Sicily. I was at a meeting in Erice, on a hill in the town next door. Trapani is a big Mafia hangout and the place where I had the most delicious ripe olives ever.

Anyway, the tour starts with a short bus ride from the hotel. Again, I am the only westerner, although many of the people on the tour speak some English. We go a few km west to a dock from where we take some small motor boats to “The End of the Earth.” I buy a cowboy hat for \$3 that says “Ronaldino” on the front. Ronaldino is the fading, scandal-ridden (aren’t they all?), former Argentinian football star. I doubt he knows that his name is on straw hats in Sanya. Just desserts.

After a 15-minute boat ride we arrive at the small island. It is very well developed, with a national park on the SW side and a public beach complex on the NE. We are taken by a small electric train to the west side first and walk around for over an hour. It is very well laid out and scenic. I talk at length with a senior scientist from the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Beijing, who was at the IRDR meetings. He is the lead author of China’s plan for agricultural

adaptation to climate change, so there are several people I know in DC who would like to get in touch with him. Nice guy.

We then go to the beach side, on the NE end of the island. I immediately put on the swim suit that I had the foresight to bring to China and go for a dip in the roped off swimming area in the ocean. It faces the Sanya shoreline, so the water is dirtier than on the far side, where we first went. If the water on the SW side, facing away from Sanya, could be compared to the Caribbean, the NE side is the Jersey shore. I swim for about 10 minutes in the sea, which is quite rough and dirty. It is enough.

After looking around at the shops and the restaurants, we all meet at the beach front buffet. The restaurant is just passable and only because they have quite a bit from which to choose. They know they have a captive clientele and it shows.

There are a lot of activities at the beach, including all kinds of jet skis and motor boats, parasailing, diving, snorkeling and more. They aren't cheap. I decide to go parasailing, which is a hoot, particularly when you don't speak the language. After signing the waiver I do not understand and putting on the gear using sign language, I wait in line in the blazing sun for about a half hour. I had slathered myself earlier with the questionable sun screen. It looked like cheap moisturizer, but it ended up doing the trick. Finally, my turn comes and I go up with one of the staff (all parasailing trips are duos). I then buy a CD with some photos to prove it.

We head back around 16:00 and are at the hotel an hour later and about \$100 lighter. After some calls and emails I decide to go to the Sonic for a good dinner. I look at the different restaurants and choose the Chinese one, which is good, but not great. The best food in town that I found was definitely at the RADI complex, although of course I didn't eat at the Ritz or the Meridien or other top-notch hotels, so my verdict is reserved. Still, for the money ;-)

On the way back from dinner, I am tuckered out from the sun and walking all day, so I splurge and decide to take a putt-putt for the last leg, after I have a Black Label nightcap at a hotel. The trike cab costs 8 RMB, but I give her 10. Big spender. I assume I would sleep well that night, but I toss and turn.

November 17 – *Back to Beijing*

I spend most of Sunday traveling back. I leave the hotel at 11:00 and get back to RADI after 20:00. I'm glad that I get to the Sanya airport a couple hours before the flight, since I have to visit 3 counters before I get my boarding pass. When the typhoon delayed my trip from Beijing, I had changed my return trip by a day too so that I would have some time to look around Sanya. All I got was a stamped piece of paper with the flight info and locator number handwritten by the agent. She said I would need to get the return ticket in Sanya. So, after all kinds of online checks and phone calls to the powers that be, the third ticket agent decides that I am either a bona fide customer or too much trouble to continue to process, so I get a seat on the plane.

It's a wide body and full, as all planes in China are nowadays. There are now reportedly riots due to delayed or cancelled flights, much like there have been riots in the train stations on holidays. I

spend most of the trip writing this travelogue, but the last 45 minutes or so I periodically look out the window. It is clear and cloudless, but I can barely make out the ground because of the smog. Frightful. A full moon shines above in the clear blue sky, however. What's even more disconcerting is that when we land, the sky is blue and the moon shines as it did above the haze. That means that even when it appears clear and relatively pollution-free on the ground, there is nonetheless a thick smog blanketing everything, which you can only see from above.

I decide to have dinner at the airport, since it is a whole lot easier than stopping somewhere with my luggage or going back to RADI at Haidian and then going out again. I go to one of the restaurants and have steak frites and a Chilean cabernet. The frites and the wine are good, but the steak has a strange texture that I have encountered a few other times in China before, not on the Aussie meat but on the Chinese beef. I don't know how to explain it or what causes it, but I need to find out because it's weird. More anon.

I take the train, metro and gypsy cab back as on the previous Sunday and finish catching up with this travelogue. My trip to China is one quarter complete. The heat is now turned on at the hotel, so I am happy.

November 18 – *Marco Polo comes full circle*

I work all day on various things. I meet a retired remote sensing expert from the Netherlands, who spends his time consulting in different Asian countries, including North Korea. Proč jim leze do prdele? I'm sure that some say that about me in China as well, though the two are not comparable. He will give a one-day lecture to the trainees in Sanya later in the week. One of the senior staff at RADI invites us to lunch at the hotel where I am staying. It's hard to believe, but the food is substantially worse than in the cafeteria right next door.

That evening, like almost every one of the evenings here, I decide to go out for dinner. I take the gypsy cab to the metro, but instead of going to the mall, as I had planned, I walk around the area. A couple of blocks on, I come across a "Global Food Café", so I go inside to see the menu. Although no one speaks English, the menu is bilingual and has pictures of the dishes, so I can point. Indeed, it is a restaurant of dishes from all over, including Italy, France, US, Russia, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and, of course, China. I may have left out a country or two. I go with a mixed salad, a lasagna and a red Bordeaux. Not bad. I can return to this place (but don't).

November 19 – *A meeting with the Science Attaché at the US Embassy*

I have a meeting this morning with Dr. Emily Ashworth, the National Science Foundation (NSF) representative and Science Attaché at a satellite office of the US Embassy. It takes almost 1.5 hours to go each way, mostly by metro, so the whole morning is shot. The offices are in the gleaming Silver Tower building in an upscale part of town, on a stop of the high-speed airport connection train. There is a nice coffee shop in the basement, so I have a much needed "grande" since I have arrived somewhat early. I went to that building once a few years back to meet with another official NSF rep there, Alex De Angelis, who was pulled out of retirement by NSF to do another tour of duty in Beijing. The office suite has no sign by the elevator "for security

reasons”, so I have to hunt around a bit to find it. The U.S. government is now officially and pathologically paranoid.

Dr. Ashworth is a retired science administrator, a Chinese-American who also was persuaded to come out of retirement to represent NSF in China. Her husband is a retired professor from UT Austin and spent his time there writing a book. She has been there for about 3 years, but is leaving next month for Austin. NSF had wanted her to stay another half year, but she and her husband couldn't take another cold and polluted Beijing winter.

We talk about her work and mine and trade some highlights. She is very complimentary, having heard good things about me from her NSF colleagues, so I am pleased. She tells me that she wants to arrange for me to talk with other Embassy staff, but next week is Thanksgiving and the week after that Joe Biden is coming, so the whole focus is on his visit. Maybe I will have a meeting with them after he leaves, she avers, but nothing comes of it.

On the way back I decide to have lunch at a dumpling restaurant at the RADI metro stop, Xi'erqi on Line 13, instead of eating at the institute. I had scouted it out earlier and it looked very new and clean. Unfortunately, the menu has no English and no pictures and none of the staff speaks any English, so I leave it up to them. I get a dozen steamed dumplings filled with shrimp and some green veggie. The dumplings are fresh y and the condiments are good, but the dumplings are a bit bland. I get another dozen anyway. The kitchen has a glass wall and the waiters wear jackets and gloves. Very professional, at least in appearance.

I have a productive meeting for a couple of hours in the afternoon with several RADI staffers about my main project there and we clarify a lot of the outline I had produced earlier. I come back to the hotel around 17:00 and work on this travelogue for about an hour. I do not feel like going out for dinner, so I have to go to the cafeteria. I get there at 18:15, just as they are almost done mopping up. A handful of customers are finishing up and I am the last one. All the food is cleared away except some bowls of noodles that have a few veggies and a couple of what looks like quail eggs. They take the bowl with these ingredients, pour some hot broth over them and heat it up to a fast boil on the stove. I am going to tell them to stop heating it before it gets super hot, but I think better of it; the boiling of all the ingredients is probably a good thing in more ways than one.

There are some trays with other ingredients to put on top, including two meats and two veggies, but I just point to the cabbage tray. The whole concoction costs about \$2. I generally don't like soups in China. They are served with every banquet meal and some of them are really bad, so I usually either decline them or have a couple bites. This is really tasty, however, and well spiced, even though I have no idea what the broth is and probably remain blissfully ignorant. The only problem is eating the noodles, which are long, spaghetti style and really slippery. I have a small Asian-style spoon, which can scoop the broth and veggies but not the noodles, and chop sticks for the plentiful noodles, which is nonetheless a chore to slurp down. I get near the bottom of the bowl, to the point of diminishing returns. I am still somewhat hungry, but I have a bunch (literally) of mini-bananas from Sanya (each one is about two bites) and a few Dove chocolate bars left, so I won't die of starvation.

I finish the evening working some more on this travelogue and watching a qualifying match between China and Saudi Arabia for the 2015 Asia Cup. Neither team is very good. [As an aside, I actually saw Saudi Arabia play West Germany with my father live at the Munich Olympics in 1972, before the shooting started. The Saudis scored first—against themselves—but fortunately the self goal was not the deciding one, with the final score being 3-1.] This game ends in a 0-0 tie. Although the Chinese outplay the Saudis, they cannot put the ball in the net.

November 20 – *The first of many sojourns to Zhongguancun*

I work all morning at the office and at 12:25 I go to the cafeteria to get some lunch. Again, I am the last customer and most of the food has been removed. I get a side order of bok choy, a fried chicken drumstick and rice that you scoop with a wooden spoon from a big tub. It is all quite tasty, if inelegant.

At 14:45 I driver picks me up and we go to the CAS Computer Network and Information Center (CNIC), which also houses the secretariat for the Chinese National Committee for CODATA. I have been there numerous times before. CNIC is located in Zhongguancun, the high-tech and IT district of Beijing. It is in the central north of town, between the 3rd and 4th Ring Roads.

I meet with LI Jianhui, my CODATA committee counterpart, and ZHANG Hui and LI Chang, other Chinese CODATA staffers. We talk about a data science report that they are completing. I want to help with the English translation of the summary, so that it can be published appropriately in the online CODATA Data Science journal. We also discuss a possible workshop in DC later next year on data policy, using disaster data as an example. Jianhui wants to start another round of regular bilateral meetings, like the ones we held over a 6-year period in the recent past. Maybe. We also talk about the international CODATA, the World Data System and the Research Data Alliance.

The meeting lasts about 1.5 hours and he takes me to an early dinner at a restaurant. It turns out to be the same as the one I ate dinner at two nights earlier—the global foods café. I have some fried chicken wings, garlic bread and sautéed greens.

On the way back I stop at a metro station two stations short of the RADI one. I see a very busy street and it is still early. I decide that I will start a practice here that I first began in Paris; that is, I get off at a different metro stop every night or two, explore the area on foot and eat at a local restaurant. This time I had already eaten, but the stop was interesting nonetheless and I will return.

November 21 – *The pollution creeps back*

I go to bed early the night before, so I wake up around 4:30 and get my DC work done. The sun rises over a landscape that is now obscured with a polluted haze. I can only see a faint outline of the mountains that are about 10km away and the buildings on the other side of the campus are murky. As the day progresses I can feel my throat and eyes starting to burn, my chest feels a discomfort and I begin to cough. I would characterize it as an average Beijing day and I hope it's not going to get worse.

I get a lot of work done and talk with Alex before lunch. I go to the cafeteria on time this time—around 11:30—and the place is mobbed. I think the Chinese would die in Spain. I get a couple of veggie sides and a small plate of dumplings with mystery filling, and it is all good. A young Aussie researcher joins me for lunch. I met him in Sanya and he is here for a year, while finishing his doctorate. He works for Geoscience Australia. He asks me if I have any plans for Thanksgiving and I do not, so he suggests we find some place in SanLiTun or some other expat spot. He is going by train to Xi'an, a journey I made in 2004 with Alex and Jeff, so I tell him some about it.

After working some more in the afternoon, I decide to go to the local mall to get some supplies and dinner. I figure that the short 6-station metro offshoot from my station, Xi'erqi, will take me there, since the first stop in the Life Science Park, which I passed on my ill-fated walk back from the mall the first time I went there. The second stop must be the mall, right? Well, I get on that metro line and everything after the Life Science Park appears to be residential and out in the boonies. I decide to take the metro the full 6 stops just to see what there is to see and maybe get off to explore somewhere, but I get to the end of the line and nothing has come up. So, I take the same train back and arrive at Xi'erqi an hour after I first departed. I can scratch that line off my list.

Since there will be no mall shopping this evening, I set out on foot looking for a suitable restaurant. There are a few fast food outlets—McDonald's, Subway and local—and the Café Global Foods, at which I've already eaten at twice this week, so I look for another alternative.

Although it is a university area, it must be a smaller satellite campus and it's mostly office buildings and 3rd-rate hotels. One of the hotels has a decent-looking restaurant called Café Favorite Food, so I go in. The tables have checkered tablecloths and a glossy menu with pictures. I order a small vegetarian pizza and a Heineken. The pizza is a deep dish variety, with broccoli, corn and peppers on top and what seems to be jack cheese. Not too bad. The beer comes out warm and they don't have any of any kind that's cold, so they bring a glass with ice. Oh well.

I go to take the gypsy cab at the train station. It is a slow night and they are waiting to fill up the car with passengers to make more money. Four people crammed into a compact will yield about \$13. There is a young woman and myself. After about 10 minutes a young guy comes up, but he stands around smoking and the driver goes to look for more passengers. I have a conference call scheduled in less than an hour and no other passengers are in sight, so I decide to make a little demonstration.

I get out of the car and pretend that I am going to walk to the main drag about 50m away. This creates a lot of commotion among the drivers there and the passenger hawker, as I had hoped. I point to my watch and they usher me back with all kinds of verbiage as the young man with the smoke gets in too. There are now 3 of us and the driver gets in as well and we go. I had no clue what they were saying or what I could say, but I felt I had some leverage since they didn't want to lose a fare. It turned out I was right, although it was purely a hunch.

November 22 – *The house in Virginia is sold!*

I am delighted to say that around 6:00 a.m., Beijing time, Allison signs all the settlement papers with a power of attorney from me, and we sell the house. It takes just 2 ½ months from the time we decided to get a realtor to the actual sale. I don't think it could have been any faster. We painted the interior, the kitchen cabinets, the exterior and large deck, did some landscaping, put in new lighting, new linoleum and did various repairs. We also boxed all our stuff and moved it and the furniture into storage, and moved some of her furniture to two other places for Allison. I put most of the bills on monthly autopilot and now do the rest from China. It is a huge, time-consuming ordeal, but we did it, including a decent profit. Not bad. It exhausts me just writing about it and I really don't know how it was completed.

Allison has moved into a friend's house where she is renting a room. I will move in with Meimei when I get back in January. And I will finalize my divorce from Allison that month as well.

I am sleeping in today and working a part day. The pollution outside is slowly getting worse and the blue sky above is becoming milky white. The outline of the mountains is gone and the buildings in the distance are starting to disappear. My respiratory symptoms are not worse, but I feel it.

Not speaking the language makes everyday chores much harder. I have written about some of them, like taking taxis, eating at restaurants, shopping, but there are others. One of them is my periodic laundry service. I have done laundry twice here this time. The first instance was two days before I was to leave for Sanya. The girls behind the hotel counter spoke hardly any English, but they got the drift that one pile was wet laundry and one was for dry cleaning and it was to be delivered to room 513. I didn't need it done in one day, but I got it the next day anyway, if still somewhat damp (and no dry cleaning!).

When I came back from Sanya, I had a much bigger pile of laundry to do. I brought it down to the front desk on Tuesday morning and again used sign language for the simple task, but as of mid-day Friday it has not been returned. This is now beginning to worry me, since it is about half of the clothes I've got here and I am starting to run out. Moreover, I don't have a pile of laundry to take down that pretty much speaks for itself. Or something. So I start planning how I will gesticulate to show that I brought a big pile of laundry 3 days ago and I need for them to check where it is. I bring a dirty shirt with me for some show and tell, but it turns out that the girl behind the counter speaks pretty good English, unlike all the rest, and she seems to understand completely what the situation is and promises to take care of it.

I go to the cafeteria around 11:45 and it is mobbed. I get some dry vegetable, egg and noodle stir fry and a side of very greasy eggplant. The stir fry is very tasty, with some root vegetable masquerading as the noodles, but I can't help notice that some of the veggies have seen better days. I weed some out, but what I do eat tastes good. And although the sautéed eggplant has garlic, green onion and black beans on it, all of which I like, it is swimming in oil and all I can eat is the top layer before I get into the grease. Tasty, but deadly. I go back to my hotel room to eat a dark chocolate Dove bar and work on this journal some more.

In the late afternoon I take a gypsy cab and metro to meet with LIU Chuang at the CAS campus by the Olympic Park to work on a *Science* article and planning the workshop in Kenya. On the way to her office, I stop by an old haunt across the street where I stayed last April, the Continental Grand Convention Center Hotel. I have to get a coffee. The RADI coffee bar is nice, but it is never open and tea just doesn't make it.

After some work, we have an early dinner at a Peking duck house. The roast duck is as good as I've had. I particularly like the veggies, which include sautéed pea pods with lotus petals and sauteed leafy pea shoots, both of which are delicious. We also get a plate of duck feet with strong mustard. At first I resist, but then I try one with plenty of mustard. It is just gristle and whatever taste it has is not very good. LIU Chuang insists its great and good for your joints, and takes the left overs back home for lunch the next day. I wash the rich food down with some Yangjing beer. All in all, a great meal.

November 23 – *Out and about*

Although I haven't been particularly cooped up and have lots of work to do both here and in the U.S., I am feeling antsy and want to go out. Besides, my laundry still hasn't arrived and it's been 5 days, so I am running out of unmentionables (what the English euphemistically called underwear, according to my Ma) and other items.

I decide to go back to District 798 to the restaurant and German café for some more great food and conversation, and to do some shopping. The pollution is another increment worse, but the sun is shining, there is some blue sky and it is probably going to be in the mid-50s today.

I have lunch at the same café I went to before in District 798, with the same outstanding results—pizza with eggplant, ripe black olives and Parma ham; Santa Rita cab; Perrier; 3 *petit fours*—an approximation of a *tarte tatin*, a pear cake, and something chocolate; and two affogatos. Roughing it in China.

I look around some more galleries and one is especially amusing. I recall a large fake map with absurd geographic names written on it, or the voice of Obama giving a speech (unseen) with an outdoor audience of very casually dressed Chinese who are laughing hysterically throughout. Very original political satire. There is also a pile of ashes on the floor interlaced with some partly burned pages (of what I don't know), a huge wooden beam structure with crushed plastic dolls at the joints, and a painted jazz instrument ensemble waiting to be played.

On the way back, I go to an underground mall that I know at the Olympic Park in order to do some needed shopping. I have given up on the mall nearer to me since I can't seem to be able to get back to it.

I take my stuff back and go out again, this time to a university area two metro stops away at WuDaoKou. There are some clubs there where I can go dancing. It's very loud and crowded. I am semi-drunk and get up on a small stage with some other people and dance like a banshee. After about half an hour of this I fall off the back and luckily am caught by a group of Chinese

who just happen to be there. I take this as a clue and leave. I get back to the hotel after midnight and my laundry has been delivered!

November 24 – Xizhimin, Ping’Anli and WuDaoKou

I get up at 8:00 am, which is later than usual, with a bit of a hangover and work on my journal and talk with Meimei. The morning is shot by the time I hit the road. Since I have decided to do my Paris metro routine, I go to the last station on Line 13, which is the only one I have not visited or seen on that route. Since it’s the only station in Beijing that has 3 intersecting metro lines (13, 4 and 2), plus Beijing North Railway Station (there are also East, South and West Stations), I figure that it must have a lot of stuff there. The underground passageways among all the stations stretch out very far and there are thousands of people going back and forth. The scale, like all the constructed infrastructure here, is enormous.

I see that the Line 13 exit leads directly to a shopping mall, the “CapitaMall,” so I go inside. I am looking for lunch and some Christmas cards. It is too early in the season for the cards, but the bottom level of the 7-story mall has a food court, including a Burger King, so I go there for my fast-food trifecta this week. The menu at Burger King is by far the least “authentic” of the three. I order what is about the only same meal as in the U.S.—a whopper, fries and Coke—but the whopper has no cheese option (which I like) and the fries are thicker. It is almost the same, but not quite. In any case, enough with the fast food already. I also get two double espressos at Costa Coffee.

After I inhale the lunch, I go on every level of the large mall. It turns out there are lots of all kinds of restaurants, including French-Vietnamese, two Korean, more American, a bunch of different Chinese, and some coffee shops. Definitely a place to come back to eat! The other stores are mostly women’s wear.

After about an hour of menu browsing and window shopping, I take metro Line 4 to Ping’Anli, two stops away, à la my practice in Paris. I have no clue what I will find there, but it’s toward the city center. It turns out to be a hutong area, one of the few in Beijing that has not been torn down and replaced by high rises. The entire north, east and much of the west and of course the center has been converted to high-rise modernity, and only part of the west and I believe the south of the city (though I’m not sure) are still traditional.

I walk a lot and crisscross the neighborhood. There is one main drag that has perhaps 20 musical instrument stores. In places it reminds me of Rt. 15 in Mt. Lebanon in Pittsburgh, PA—small one or two-story shops with retro signage. I go deeper and walk on a narrow street that’s a throwback to the olden days. The traffic is all of the two and three wheel variety, with perhaps half un-motorized. The motorized ones are almost all electric. Silent, but deadly ;-). I go by the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker...and lots more. It’s a real time warp.

After almost two hours of this I retrace my steps on the metro lines and get off at the WuDaoKou station, which is where I was the evening before. I look for a massage place and get a 30-minute neck and back massage for \$20, including tip. It is quite cheap but twice as expensive as San

Gabriel, outside L.A. the month before (now that's a story!). It is well-worth it, however, and a lot of the stiffness is gone, although the massage itself was quite painful.

I walk around the neighborhood and end up on Zhongguancun East boulevard, which is quite elegant. I did not know that the avenue went out so far. I turn back onto WuDaoKou Avenue and look for a place to eat. There are some mildly interesting restaurants there, but I come across a Global Foods Market that I had seen the day before, so I go inside. It is my kind of place! They have goodies from all over the world. In booze they stock German, Belgian and British beers (and more), wines and liquors from everywhere and a very good assortment of champagnes. In foods they have European chocolates, cheeses and cold cuts, Mexican specialties, fine cookies and crackers and more. I buy my dinner there: two vacuum-packed cheese slices from Italy and Spain (a Grana Padano and a Gran Iberico); a vacuum-packed ham cold-cut from Germany (beerschinken vom Bayern); a bag of crostinis from Italy; a small San Pellegrino; and a screwtop shiraz from Oz. I take the metro and gypsy cab back to the hotel and have a great dinner. I'll definitely be back.

November 25 to 27 – *I begin to learn some Mandarin and have ruminations on migrants*

It is really freezing. A cold front moved in Sunday night and it got about 15F degrees colder by Monday, with very blustery conditions. I spend most of my days working at RADi and on NAS matters in the evenings, including two lengthy conference calls that end around midnight on the 25th and 26th. In the early mornings I make personal calls to the US, so I am very busy.

The only respite I have is at lunch and dinner, with quick lunches in the cafeteria and dinners at the Xizhiming CapitaMall. The lunches are OK and the only highlight is that I'm joined one day by a stranger, Pong, who spent a year at the University of Arizona in Tucson and was kind enough to provide me with some company. I eat at a "French-Vietnamese" restaurant on Monday, which it turns out is part of a fairly extensive chain and is more Chinese-Vietnamese than French. It is quite good and worth another visit. The next day I go to a Korean BBQ, which range from adequate to inedible and is very greasy to boot. An eminently forgettable place. And on the 27th, I find a reasonably good Japanese sushi restaurant, which costs only 1/3 of the terrible Korean dinner.

I also start some Chinese language lessons with one of the RADi staff. She has ordered a textbook for me, which has not yet arrived, so we go through the pronunciation of the Chinese alphabet and four tones (PinYing), which is quite complex. I am learning this with English characters, which of course are only approximations of the sounds. My knowledge of Czech, however, comes in handy because Czech pronunciation of the alphabet is identical to the international phonetic alphabet. It appears that the simple one letter vowels (Shenmu) and consonants (Yunmu) in Chinese are also phonetically correct; it is the many diphthongs and the four tones that are really complex.

Realistically, the spoken Chinese rather than the written, is what I can learn, if anything. Even though speaking and hearing it is very hard, writing it is harder still and would require another whole set of instruction and lengthy immersion, which I cannot do. The best I can hope for is some basic audibles on which I may be able to build.

Since this is a brief entry, I am taking the opportunity to reflect on an aspect of life in Beijing that I have had some occasion to observe or experience over the years: the status of internal Chinese migrants. As in all countries, especially less developed ones, there is a big exodus from the countryside to the cities. The Chinese government is trying to stem the tide by spending money to make rural life better. I have been to the countryside in western China and around Xi'an, and they appear to be spending a lot. Economically, it is a losing battle, however, since the rural folk see the cities as their opportunity.

The Chinese government is also trying to overwhelm the west of the country with the dominant Han culture. The west is made up primarily of what the Chinese refer to as “nationalities”, distinct tribes or cultures that are heavily Buddhist or Islamic. A lot of them either resent or despise the central regime and the Han dominance. Think Tibet. I have not been in the far west—Tibet, which is a distinct Buddhist culture, or Urumqi north and west of Tibet, which is Islamic and borders on Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. However, those influences are felt as far east as Szechuan Province, where a lot of the self-immolations have occurred in recent years. In any case, there is a strong cultural tension and political repression that underlies the largely rural and nomadic west.

The other weapon at the government's disposal is to deny local registration in the cities to rural migrants. People are allowed to move, but in order to enjoy the public services of their new home, they need to be officially documented and their migration approved. The government makes this difficult, especially in the four National Central megacities: Beijing (and Tianjin), Shanghai, Chongqing and Guangzhou. Hong Kong is a “special” national central city. What's also interesting is that all aspects of life are stratified as well, including businesses, infrastructure, social life, and so on. The four nationally anointed city areas have the toniest stores, airports, other infrastructure and amenities. Between them they now have over 100 million people in the 4 greater metropolitan areas and I believe that they have eclipsed many of the OECD countries in per capita GNP and in infrastructure. It is no coincidence that all 38 of the nation's currently acknowledged billionaires are located in these cities, and nowhere else. They are impressive and an economic magnet—a country within a country.

The migrants, at the opposite end of the totem pole, are totally disenfranchised and destitute. I first got a glimpse of them in 2004, when I was taking a train with Alex and Jeff from the Beijing West Train Station to Xi'an. We saw the large squatter camps of the migrants in the western suburbs by the train tracks. They were similar to the favelas of Rio or the slums of Delhi that I had seen before, but were better hidden. The government apparently keeps close control of their movements and minimizes their appearances in public view. Some of them might be the street sweepers or public toilet attendants, I don't know. Most of them must be invisible, even to the local residents, and scavenge what they can.

I have seen more of them this time, since I am here not only for a longer stay, but take the metro to more places. The squatter camps border the metro tracks as well, as do solitary shacks of perhaps 2m x 2m. It must be frightfully cold and desolate there on winter nights, if they can even withstand the periodic high winds. These shacks are interspersed with what looks like cheap public housing of small apartment row houses. I also have seen some beggars, street people who are mostly older people and some mothers with small children (à la *methôde Roma*). Most of my

time, however, is spent in the elite scientific circles and among the regular working class denizens in the stores, metros and streets, so I am sheltered and blissfully uninformed.

At some point, these people will gain critical mass and get organized. This will not happen real soon, but it seems likely, especially if the Chinese economy falters (see below).

November 28 – *Thanksgiving in Beijing*

I work today at RADI like any other day and get some invitations to join meetings and give presentations. I also have a telcon with Simon Hodson in Paris about scientific data in developing countries. After that, I meet up with my Aussie acquaintance, Dave Hudson, to go to the American restaurant for a turkey dinner. Dave is not related to the Hudsons who left their names on the waterways of North America. I asked.

Dave shows me a nifty app on his mobile that shows the pollution count of $> 2.5 \mu$ particles in the atmosphere. The global level for healthy air, as recommended by the UN's World Health Organization, is 25 particles per cubic m. His phone shows a level of 95, which is almost 4 times the threshold. What's scary is that the air seems to be quite clean all day, with the mountains in the north completely visible. Dave does not take any precautions below 200 particles per cubic m. Between 200 and 400 he uses nasal filters and on the occasions when its over 400 he does not go out. He has an air filtration system in his apartment. Last February, Beijing made the global news when it had about 800 particles per cubic m for several days. You can't see across the street on days like that.

After a cab ride, a lengthy metro ride and a walk, we arrive at the Big Smoke in the Renaissance Hotel in the ChaoYang near SanLiTun. There are many westerners in the area. The restaurant is well reputed and indeed the meal is very good—turkey, gravy, cranberries, maple glazed sweet potato, cauliflower with some white sauce, and chipotle chicken wings (Dave's idea)—and some self-brewed IPAs. Nothing was bad.

The couple right next to us was western as well a Canadian woman and a Syrian-American guy, both of whom had been in China (first Taiwan) for decades. They are both real characters. He has some local ice cream parlor that looks worth trying. They share some of their dessert, which is an apple pie à la mode, and which is really good. It is a lot of fun, despite the 2.5 hours of travel back and forth.

But the best thing that happens that evening, at least I think so, is that Dave tells me that he is going skiing in the local mountains. As soon as I hear this, I invite myself, because I cannot pass this up. After some planning he invites me to spend Friday night on his pull-out couch, since he and his wife are leaving at 7:30 am with some Chinese friends. The logistics will be a whole lot easier if I am there. We have no great expectations, since it has not snowed yet nor been particularly cold, except this week. In fact, I don't see how such an outing is even possible, but we shall see.

November 29 – *The real estate bubble*

The only thing noteworthy during the day is that I go to dinner with Liu Chuang at a famous Szechuan restaurant on Datun Road. We have some vegetables and veggie soup and a classic Szechuan dish of braised pork belly that has way too much cholesterol, even with half the fat removed. It is delicious nonetheless.

I take the metro to meet Dave near SanLiTun and then walk to the Hudson's apartment about 10 minutes away near the Russian Embassy. They have a very nice place. He says it is about \$1200 cheaper per month than living right in the SanLiTun District. His wife, Ella, works for an Australian foreign aid agency, focusing mostly on Mongolia. She just returned from Ulaan Baatar, which was -13 ° C and very polluted from the burning of coal and dung. Nothing like the atmosphere filled with burnt horse shit particulates. Nice. (But see my Notes from Mongolia.)

Dave generously gives me a disposable air mask and some small nostril air filters for the bad days. Since they also put me up for the night and are nice people, I resolve to take them out to dinner before they leave on their Christmas holiday.

The apparently high cost of the apartment brings up the whole issue of real estate in China. Although the government owns all the land, it does grant 99-year leases (presumably renewable, but also revocable) to eligible citizens who wish to own a house or apartment or land. As the Chinese have become richer and private foreign investment is still forbidden, a lot of their excess income has been invested in domestic real estate. Many people now have second homes and there is a lot of speculation in apartments and apartment buildings. This has been going on for quite a few years (I remember reading about the high cost of apartment and office space in Shanghai already at the turn of the century).

This has predictably led to very high real estate prices, especially in the biggest cities, with prices commensurate with the priciest cities in other parts of the world. Despite a small but growing ultra-rich class and the pervasiveness of corruption, both large and small, which enriches others, the average citizen makes many times less than the western counterpart. For example, I am told that the mid-level Ph.D. engineers at government-funded RADI only make a salary of about \$20K/year, with perhaps another \$20K in perks/discounts. [Note: on my last evening in China there is a discussion in Chinese by my hosts about salaries and I am told that there is a range running several times that, but I don't get more details.] This combination is perhaps 1/3 of the total compensation for a government remote sensing engineer in another capital city I know in the US, and perhaps 1/4 or 1/5 of the salary alone. I don't know what people in business make, probably considerably more, but Beijing is a very expensive place to live.

At the same time, there are reportedly entire small cities and certainly large blocks of apartment complexes that sit empty, either built on speculation by a construction company or as an investment by some conglomerate. Moreover, the banks are on an off-the-books lending spree and there is a lot of corporate and personal borrowing, with personal debt around 200% of GNP (I read in an editorial by Gordon Brown in the International NY Times at the café in District 798).

Despite some policies by the central government to cool this down, including limiting individuals only to one other residence, sooner or later this frenzy of buying on speculation will come home to roost, much as it has in the US and the EU PIGS. I have been saying this for at least two years, so my hunch is that it will be sooner rather than later.

So what will happen when the shit hits the fan? Well the laws of economics are the same everywhere, although the means to deal with the mess depends more on the state of the economy and the ability to address the problems. There will be some panic selling and banks teetering when the prices plateau and start to fall, but then what?

The central government has tremendous reserves and a command economy at its disposal, so the situation will not be as dire as in other places. I'm sure that the largest financial institutions will be bailed out and I suspect individuals will be largely prohibited from buying or selling until the situation is more stable. But in the meantime, the nation's economic growth will slow down and there will be less purchase of foreign goods, so it is the collateral damage that may be much worse. The central government keeps a lid on social unrest by a very fast pace of economic growth and increasing economic prosperity. But there are still many small riots and signs of unrest. What will happen when the pace of growth slows a lot? How will the government deal with that? Moreover, if there is a lot less money to buy foreign goods or especially foreign debt, what will happen elsewhere? I think we will soon find out and it won't be pretty.

November 30 – *Skiing in China!*

Well the Hudsons and I get up early and catch a ride with a mother and young son to Nanshuan Ski Park, northeast of Beijing. We are met by a carload of other skiers from RADI. They have prepaid the tickets and we queue up to get our cards that entitle us to get all the equipment, including ski pants, parka, gloves and goggles. The actual ski equipment is not very good, but neither is the mountain.

Actually, the conditions on the mountain are as good as could possibly be expected. All the snow is artificial and although only the lower half of the mountain is covered, it is covered well in packed powder. There are three kiddie slopes each with some lift—a poma, a t-bar and some kind of rubberized moving walkway—plus a quad and a double chairlift to the mid-top. There are two intermediate runs that take me well under a minute to navigate to the bottom. The very top is about another equal amount higher that is serviced by another chair, with one black diamond to the side and a luge-type winding track that looks like a lot of fun.

Another barren trail on the lower mountain also has some very high (i.e., 6-7 meter) man-made jumps and a trail with trees that are wrapped for mitigating the inevitable collisions. There are no waivers, even in Chinese.

All-in-all they have made the most of what is there. What they can't control are the skiers themselves, most of whom are beginners. They ski much like they drive, so you need to look in all directions all the time, especially at the bottom of the hill.

There are stores with ski wear and equipment and several restaurants serving both Chinese and western fare. Unfortunately and surprisingly there are no ski caps or other garments with the Nanshan Ski logo. Darn. A ski Canada restaurant has Canadian ski videos and pictures, Moosehead beer, and burgers and fries. The whole complex has a western architecture feel to it.

The day is sunny and quite warm and the snow loosens up more in the afternoon. I decide to take one of the smaller jumps that are set up at the end of the trail and I land on my tail bone and bruise it quite badly. Even worse, I reinjure my right shoulder muscle with the pole action so that by 3 pm I quit in considerable pain.

I hang out with the Hudsons for a couple of hours and then squeeze into the RADI car for the ride back. I consider the day a great success despite my physical traumas. I am dropped off on Metro Line 13 and hobble to the “French”-Vietnamese restaurant in CapitaMall. I am a wreck and as I sit down at the table, I land again on my butt because my chair has fallen over from the weight of my backpack and coat. I am not a happy camper.

[Note: since that day I have learned that there are two other ski areas, one very near Beijing, which is like Nanshan, but one in the northern mountains about 3 hours away by car. That ski area, the Genting Resort Secret Garden, is still in development but is a bigger mountain and will have a lot more runs. I also did some internet surfing and found yet more areas in other parts of the country, though none of them looks all that great. This could be worth a few days visit in the future.]

December 1 and 2 – *Recuperation*

I wake up after about 10 hours of oxycodone sleep and I can barely move. I drag myself to the cafeteria and sleep another 3 hours in the afternoon. I then walk gingerly to the cab and metro to WuDaoKou, and get another high-class deli meal and Aussie shiraz and take it back to the hotel. I go to bed early and sleep another long night.

On Monday, December 2, I do some work, but spend most of the day trying not to move too much. I end it with a 2-hour conference call talking about a white paper on the legal interoperability of Earth observation satellite data that I am co-authoring for the international Group on Earth Observations. There is pain everywhere. I have reached the half-way point of my sojourn here.

December 3 – *A trip to the hospital*

I am somewhat better two days later, but still in a lot of pain, so LIU Chuang urges me to go to a hospital that afternoon to make sure I don't have a serious injury. I am sure that I did not break anything, but I think it might be prudent and I can get some therapeutics. I also feel a cold coming on, so I need to stop at a pharmacy to get some Banlangen Keli.

She kindly takes a couple of hours off to shepherd me through the hospital maze, which I would never have navigated on my own, at least not so quickly and cheaply. It is a People's Liberation

Army (PLA) hospital not far from the Olympic Park (see one of my earlier Notes from Beijing about my visits to the central PLA Hospital).

Stop one: window 8 on floor one, where I get instructions and pay 5 RMB for the first consultation. Stop two: desk on floor two to get a number for the consultation with a specialist. Stop three: see the specialist on floor two and get instructions for getting an x-ray taken of my shoulder. Stop four: go back to floor one, window 3 and pay 110 RMB for the x-ray and diagnosis consultation. Stop five: go to an adjacent building and the window on the first floor there to get a number for the x-ray. Stop six: go to x-ray room #3 and get two images taken. Stop seven: go to room #2 next door and get the x-ray images and the written report. Stop eight: take the x-rays and report back to the first building and go to the desk on the fourth floor to get a number to see a specialist. Stop nine: see the specialist who looks at the x-rays, examines my shoulder, diagnoses the injury and gives me a prescription. Stop ten: go across the parking lot to the hospital pharmacy to get the prescription filled, but it is now 17:10 and they are closing and I can't get the pills (I get them at another pharmacy later that evening).

The whole 10-stop process takes 1.5 hours. I have the following observations. It is very fast. I see two doctors, two technicians, several administrators, and a pharmacist in that amount of time.

It is very cheap. The whole visit cost under \$20, full payment since I don't have local insurance (the drugs with 2 refills cost about \$16).

There is no privacy. I was amazed that in spite of numbers being assigned to each patient that there were 3 to 4 patients at once in each of the two consultation rooms. In the first one we were told to leave at one point because the doctor had to consult with one patient about a "women's issue". We walked into the x-ray room before the patient before us was finished. We listened to two patients before us get diagnosed with their x-rays displayed on a lit panel on the wall, and two other patients listened to mine. I didn't care much, but such behavior would never be tolerated in the US, much less in Europe.

The quality of care. That depends. The diagnosis is not very thorough. The doctor rules out bone damage, which is good, and prescribes some pain killers, which is OK except that it begs the question of what causes the pain. I suspect a muscle tear or sprain, or some cartilage damage, but there is no answer. In the U.S., you might get a better diagnosis and additional treatment, but maybe not. A sizable fraction of the U.S. population would not even have that limited diagnosis, although they might not miss too much. My Chinese colleagues are not very keen on their health care system. At least it was fast and cheap (for me on this—and a couple of prior—occasions).

December 4 – *A CODATA day*

I am picked up by a driver at the RADI hotel and go to a meeting with some key members of the Chinese National Committee for CODATA and with Simon Hodson the CODATA executive director. Three of the Chinese co-chairs give presentations and they are all impressive, despite my involvement to varying extents with all of them. We also have an in-depth discussion about the activities of the international CODATA. It is a very substantive day and not at all a pro forma meeting with a foreign visitor.

We have a very good lunch at the executive dining area of CNIC (the host institute) and I let everyone know that I think the government institutes consistently have the best cooking in China. They all laugh and nod in agreement. After the meeting, I go with Simon and his handler (a very personable young guy named Dong Liang, who accompanied me on some recent trips as well) to the Jade Palace Hotel, also a place I stayed at on earlier trips. We chat for about 1.5 hours and then take an interminable taxi ride in rush hour to a very luxurious hotel overlooking the Olympic Park.

We are at the immodestly named and over-hyped “7-Star” Pangu Hotel. The private lane above street level is lined with Mercedes, BMWs, Audis and even a Maserati. We meet Liu Chuang, who hosts the three of us to some bar food and drinks on the 21st floor, overlooking the Olympic stadiums and other lit-up structures. It is very impressive.

December 5 – *Some unrelated thoughts about basketball and infrastructure*

I am moderately sick with a cold, despite the Banlagen Keli, and still quite sore from the skiing. Although I get a lot of work done, I sleep a couple of hours in the afternoon and don’t feel like going out for dinner, so I eat some Fritos and an ice cream bar, and drink a couple of Belgian beers. Now THAT’S an American male thing to do! I can’t taste a thing anyway.

The only noteworthy activity is that I watch some NBA basketball, while eating my junk food. There is a great deal of hoop-la introducing this show on the network. Then there are two male commentators sitting at a desk and a female commentator standing on the side next to a table with two basketball jerseys. The commentator on the left does most of the initial talking and then smirks as he introduces the female journalist. She talks for some time and he continues to smirk. However, the other male commentator hardly speaks and she talks for quite a long time, so it’s hard for the first guy not to take her seriously after a while.

There are a series of highlights that seem to be completely random and spanning many years, no doubt from their archives. They analyze these outtakes to death. After an hour of this they show about half of a real game, played I don’t know when, in which the Toronto *Raptors* blow a 27-point second-half lead to the Golden State *Warriors* and end up losing by 8 points. Very humiliating.

I don’t know what the fascination is with basketball, especially the NBA. I suspect it is the alien and unorthodox nature of the game and especially the players, who are mostly black and very tall and very expressive—the antithesis of the national populace. Many have (ahem) “reputations” and there is a saying that opposites attract. Even when the basketball is national, the Chinese players are very tall and strange to a nation of mostly short people. In any case, it is very popular.

I have written about the constructed environment many times including in the journal for this longer trip, but I suppose there is more that could be said. To come here is to marvel at the scale, scope and rapidity of the infrastructure they have built.

The world’s longest bridge, the largest dam, the longest canal, the most high-speed rail, many of the world’s tallest buildings, the most building materials used, the most cranes—the list of

superlatives goes on. But the scale of even the mundane infrastructure is difficult to fathom. The buildings, the transportation stations, the roads and now the cars are endless and growing. Walking in Pudong in Shanghai among the buildings sends shivers, as if you have been transported into the future.

And all this has really been done in a single generation. It is mind boggling to see.

And yet, one can get lost in the physical trappings. The pace of construction is uneven, although it is happening most everywhere. There are a lot of casualties—human, environmental. The pollution is just as stunning. Tap water cannot be drunk in any city, including embarrassingly the capital. There is a (not so) faint smell of sewage almost every time I pass a storm drain. And how the governance evolves is still an open question.

December 6 – *Corruption, large and small*

There is nothing of general interest that happens today, so I talk about the matter of corruption. Every country has corruption and there is even an international index for this. Generally speaking, the richer the country, the less corruption there is, with Scandinavian countries having the least and its citizens “uncorruptable.”

I personally have not experienced corruption practices, whether large or small, professional or personal, which is actually rather surprising given my far flung travels. However, I have read a lot about them and have heard others talk about them at length, so I know a fair amount about it.

Different countries have different flavors of corruption. Some are strictly a cash transaction, a little baksheesh to grease the skids. Others are elaborate social dances. Some expect payments at every level; others only big time business deals. Still others will accept other social favors, like in-kind contributions or sex. And corruption can be fairly clean and open—a way of doing business—or it can be a criminal activity that is controlled by organized crime, which then gets mixed up in other crimes and can be very dangerous, like in Russia.

I am told that the corruption in China is of the social variety and is primarily a business practice. It has existed for thousands of years. It was largely stamped out under Mao (like everything else in making the “modern man”), but made a resurgence in the early 1980s when Deng XiaoPing was imputed to say that “to get rich is glorious”. Whether apocryphal or not, the Chinese took his advice to heart and haven’t looked back. They have experienced double-digit growth since then and with it has come ample opportunities for getting rich the old fashioned way. Many government officials have become millionaires and a few are billionaires. They did not get that way on their state salaries. A lot of the corruption has come at the interface of government and the business community.

The new central government leadership that has been in power for a little over a year has made stamping out corruption a priority, which has sent shock waves throughout the establishment. Indeed, it is the #1 discussion item at every dinner at which I am hosted ;-). My hosts always say that they can justify the dinner out because I am a foreigner. But no more fancy dinners (for just the locals), expensive alcohol and even sex. Audits will be conducted. Bank accounts closed.

High profile officials prosecuted. Everyone's talking and writing about it. Just last week it was announced that the former head of national intelligence has been indicted, which is as strong a signal as any that the party's over. We'll see.

What they don't say, however, is how they will deal with the collateral damage. There is a very large travel industry that has been built up around all the schmoozing and it's lights out overnight. This is a major hardship for: airlines, trains and rental cars; resorts and hotels; restaurants in big cities; and the entertainment industry of various stripes. Not only are these places now largely empty, but I assume that their service industry employees are unemployed. This will have big economic, social and development implications that I don't believe have been fully thought through.

December 7 – *A welcome Tourist Trap*

I go to Beihai Lake and park as one of my metro stop excursions. Beihai Lake is just north of the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. It was recommended by an acquaintance at the Institute.

I have to take 3 different metro lines via Xizhimen, but all but the first line is very short. It takes about 45 minutes. The park entrance is a couple hundred meters south of the station.

It is exactly what the doctor ordered. The first store on the left (the lake is on the right) is a Starbucks. It is followed by a museum store (where I buy a gift later) and then a restaurant called Buffalo, which has Paulaner bier (echt Münchener Weissbier vom fass) and looks like a bierstube. The menu is very good, although the beer is extremely pricey—about \$16 per half liter!

I have a nice lunch and go on. The lake is ringed by restaurants, coffee houses, music clubs and some stores. It is definitely a night spot. I see a Szechuan restaurant, where I was taken before, but I remember seeing places called the Blue Jade, South Shore Behai Jazz, the Shi Shi Bar, and Sex an da City (I guess they spelled it a bit differently so they don't get sued for trademark infringement).

I walk around the lake 3 times, stopping for some coffee and some interesting places, doing a little shopping and getting some exercise. I leave before the sun goes down, because I want to stop at WuDaoKou on the way back to get some provisions. I think I will be coming back to Beihai, but when I return to the hotel I suddenly get very tired and think twice about it. I go to bed early, thinking I will get a lot done on Sunday.

December 8 – *Another trip to a hospital!*

I wake up at around 5:00 with an excruciating pain in my right ankle. I mean the pain is worse than any break or sprain I have had before. I have a small red bruise below the ankle and it is very swollen. I cannot find any position in which it does not hurt, a lot. This is totally bizarre and the only possible explanation is that it was caused by the long walk around the lake the previous afternoon.

I manage to get myself ready and take one of the pain killers I was given at the hospital visit on Tuesday. This helps substantially, but the swelling is still there. I hobble to the cafeteria around 11:30 and as I am leaving, I am spotted by one of the graduate students, ZHANG Hongyue, whom I met at the IRDR workshop in Sanya. Hongyue is a very personable, bubbly girl and along with her friend, SUN Wenxiao, who is also a grad student there, they insist on taking me to the hospital to get the foot x-rayed, since the pain has been so bad and the foot so swollen.

I agree to go, reluctantly, since I was just at another hospital this week (!) and after a lengthy cab ride we arrive at the Peking University Third Hospital. Only the emergency room is open on the weekend, but the same steps as at the PLA hospital are followed. I start with the x-ray, but then the M.D. thinks it's strange that I have this contusion without any apparent accident (which it is!), so he orders a vascular exam, which is a good idea. I had a DVT after I broke my left leg a couple of years ago, so his idea makes sense. I go to the vascular specialist who orders an ultrasound of the veins in my leg, but this proves negative. He then orders an ultrasound of my leg arteries, just to be complete. The artery ultrasound uses a different monitor (I know this from the U.S.), so it is not a complete rigamarole. This too proves to be negative, so I go back to the original osteopath and he now tells me that I have a hairline fracture and that I should get a plastic Velcro boot.

After about 4 hours and \$75 I leave the hospital with the two graduate students, who I'm sure are sorry that they volunteered to go with me. We get back to RADI about 18:30, having left at 12:30. The cafeteria is closed, so they take me to a hole-in-the-wall across the street in a military compound. I am out of money so they treat. There are a few shabby restaurants and a grocery store there. It is now blowing very hard and really cold. The restaurant is cold and filthy and about as low as I will go, which is pretty low. The food is OK and costs about \$1-\$2 a dish. We have some mystery pork dumplings, noodles with tomato and scrambled egg, beef with green pepper and onion in a brown sauce, chicken cubes with carrot and winter melon and a sweet sauce, some fungus and egg drop soup, and hot water from boiling the noodles. I try everything except the boiled noodle water. This drink is quite common in China, but I can do without it.

I hobble back to the hotel and Hongyue gets me some Tiger balm strips to put on my ankle once a day. They have both been very sweet and kind, and I thank them profusely. I take another pain killer and go to sleep quite early. The next day I write an email about their generous help to the RADI leadership.

December 9 – *Back to Beihai Lake*

I wake up with almost no symptoms. It has been about a day since the excruciating blow up, but the pills seem to have done the trick. They are NSAIDS (Loxonin—Loxoprofen Sodium Tablets), which claim to be metabolized quickly so the side effects for the stomach are minimized. They are only sold in a few Asian countries, including Japan. I think they are amazing.

I work a full day and send a message to the Institute hierarchy commending Hongyue and Wenxiao for their assistance. I go for dinner back to Buffalo at Beihai Lake, but this time it is not very good. The place is completely empty—for good reason—and I will not do it again.

December 10, 11, 12 and 13 – *The mid-week doldrums*

I am doing mostly a lot of work and the routine is quite nondescript, at least as far as the reader is concerned. The only daytime activity worth mentioning is another lesson in Chinese. I learn to count up to one hundred and I can now partake in the small-scale corruption ;-). Actually, that's not fair at all and I take it back.

The evenings are reasonably interesting. The first night I go back to the international deli and buy more imported cheeses, Prague ham and red wine. I eat that at my hotel room while watching some professional volleyball and basketball.

The second night I meet an IP law prof from Renmin University, WANG Chunyan, whom I have met a few times before. Chunyan is the China rep for Creative Commons, an NGO in SF that was started by U.S. IP law profs (I had a hand in it as well), and I have continued to be involved with it over the years. It would be too long an explanation as to what it's all about, but the one-sentence description is that it's focused on developing common-use licenses. If you don't know what that is, look it up.

Chunyan is a vegetarian, so I meet her at the WuDaoKou station and we go to a vegetarian restaurant she knows in that area. It is quite good and upscale, so I hope to go back. We start with something that looks like mashed potatoes drizzled with some sort of purple sauce, but it is apparently taro root with some cocoanut and blueberry sauce. It is rather sweet, but good although I would serve it as a dessert rather than an appetizer. We then have some spring rolls with raw shaved veggies, attractive to look at and no doubt healthy. The rolls are served with a sesame dipping sauce—I thought it was a saté, which it unfortunately wasn't. We also get some sautéed tree greens and lotus leaved, both of which are very good and some soy that is formed to look like sliced sausage—they could have skipped that. There are some sliced sautéed mushrooms—they look like portobellos, but are even bigger. They are very good. The meal is rounded out with some fried eggplant type of thing that is supposed to look like fried pawns, smothered with a sweet and somewhat hot Thai-type of sauce and a large plate of veggie pot stickers. The latter dish is quite good, but superfluous. Chunyan takes a lot home. The whole meal is washed down with some type of tea—not green, black, red, white or floral—so I am not sure (perhaps pu'er?). Chunyan did not know either.

The third evening I am invited to a very fancy Chinese restaurant by GU Xingfa and WANG Jinnian, both of the former IRSA, which merged with CEODE to form RADI. They seem to be doing very well.

The restaurant is at the InterContinental Hotel by the Olympic Park. I've stayed at that hotel and eaten at the restaurants—the best breakfast buffet of any hotel I have been at in Beijing and a really good Italian restaurant that has set me back mucho dinero each time I've eaten there. The menu for the Chinese place was more expensive than the Italian, so I did not eat there on my own.

The food is very good, but most likely not worth the cost. We have tasty chicken wings, an ordinary sautéed beef and pepper (high quality beef slices, though), some cold sliced eggplant in

an astringent sauce, the same sautéed tree greens I had the night before, fish pieces in a good sauce, and some western-style noodles with sliced mushrooms and cubes of pork in a very salty and savory brown sauce. Dessert was the canonical sliced fruits—watermelon, orange and small tomato. I also have a couple of TsingTao beers.

The conversation though is very stimulating. It started out in the car from RADI with WANG Jinnian. I have had an idea for over a couple of decades that I want to bounce off him, since he's in a good position to comment. It is for an Environmental News Network, basically a greatly broadened Weather Channel, using environmental satellite data to broadcast all kinds of environmental parameters, including pollution sources and effects and various land uses. Since the Chinese government has made environmental protection a priority, this idea might fly (“appropriately” censored).

Jinnian likes the idea, but says that instead of a TV channel, he would like to see a series of apps that are downloadable on mobile phones. He says that the Chinese prefer to use their phones over watching TV and I agree. He then goes on to talk about the pollution, the recent air pollution in eastern China and then the even more pervasive problem of water pollution.

I have talked about water pollution in China before and he corroborates what I've heard. He says that 99.9% of the water in China is polluted, mostly with heavy metals. He looks like he has tears in his eyes as he recounts how all the rivers are so polluted, but that a lot of the effluents are pumped directly into the ground, grossly polluting the water table. He suggests that we go to the Ministry of the Environment, but I am running out of time.

At dinner, we talk about a lot of things, social and political. The uncle of Kim Jong Un was just executed and they all agree that the time of the North Korean regime is limited. GU Gingfa tells me that he is a functionary of one of the non-Communist independent parties, the [?]. He says that the new government will lead to a lot of changes, but it must be managed change. We'll see. I offer the contrast of the free-for-all and stalemated US democracy. I also raise the real estate economic bubble, which they largely dismiss. It is a very stimulating conversation, one of the best I've had anywhere.

The next day, I go to the Ministry of Surveying and Mapping. This is a more restricted, classified agency, which is well guarded, although again no one checks my ID because I am with an approved driver. It is a well-appointed, modern building, with two large, green marble, oriental lions outside. I go to meet with CHEN Jun, the former director (and current chief scientist) of the Ministry's Geomatics Institute and the current president of the International Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing (ISPRS), a pretty big deal.

LIU Chuang, he and I are going to coordinate and publish 3 articles in the Science journal Policy Forum on the evolution of Chinese data policy and both general and specific articles by CHEN Jun and colleagues about the release of ten 30-meter satellite data sets, which is a big deal since his Ministry previously has allowed only 1:250,000 data. He is supported in his global data set endeavor by a lot of staff. We will meet two more times while I am here to work on our respective articles. He offers to take me the following week to the “best” family-run massage

place in own—nothing fancy. He shows a bunch of data results, which can form the basis of the overview article.

We end the session by going to a military-run hotel and restaurant, a place that he took me to in April, when I first met with him about this. It is staffed by waitresses who look like they're in their early twenties wearing green army uniforms (stylish outfits, not fatigues). They have name plates on their right breast and each of them has a yellow smiley face button above the name plate. The juxtaposition is amusing. I ask whether they are army recruits, but they are just employees. As a foreigner, however, I cannot get in without an escort—not that I'd want to since the food is not all that great.

December 14 – *Sex in China*

I go back to District 798 to the restaurant I've been to a couple of times before—it is called Timezone 8, for obscure reasons. I go the sushi route, which is not quite as good as the other meals I've had there, but innovative and beautifully presented. It's a very relaxing, very high-quality establishment and I really like it.

I then take a taxi to the metro and go back to the Ping'Anli hutong area to do some Christmas shopping. I go to a billiards and internet joint to shoot some pool by myself, just for fun. I return to my hotel in the early evening to deposit my loot and go right back out again to SanLiTun to get some dinner and hear some music.

I go again to the Mexican restaurant, since it has good food and drink and I want to make the connection again with Mike Dardinzky (see above). I have a good meal, but Mike is not there this evening. I then go to a series of clubs with various forms of live music, none of it very good. After about a couple of hours of this I head home, but in the meantime I am propositioned two times on the street by female pimps (not streetwalkers themselves). I am offered a “very good massage by beautiful lady” and “beautiful young girl for night”. I decline the offers, but hence the title of this entry.

Is there sex in China? Well, sort of. Babies are born. But what happens under the covers stays under cover. There is nothing overt at all.

However, I should comment on the great disparity between the births of males and females in the past few decades, which by official estimates is almost 120:100 and by foreign, independent estimates closer to 130:100. In one of this week's editions of the China Daily, a very informative and entertaining newspaper, there is a fairly long article lamenting this disparity of the sexes and the announced change in the government policy that will liberalize the much reviled rule of “one child per couple”. The article is quite frank about the social implications of this policy and the need for reform. It also talks about the “leftovers”—those men and women who euphemistically are described as not getting married.

I have a theory that this disparity of the sexes will lead to greater militarization and aggressiveness in society. Indeed, the article in the China Daily does point out the likelihood of more violent and sex crimes, although it is silent on the militarization aspects, either because the

author did not think of that angle, or the state censors nixed it, or I am barking up the wrong tree (it's not a scientific observation, just a hunch). Recent trends seem to be confirming this, however, with the rise of military expenditures and visibility in all the media, and the sabre rattling in the South China Sea. Whether or not there will be an actual conflict from the pent-up testosterone remains to be seen. However, one may be sure that there will be more sex for hire and not just for westerners.

There are several forms of prostitution in addition to the street pimps I encountered in SanLiTun. Or so I'm told. There are "karaoke" bars or clubs in the larger hotels that offer male visitors a "choice". There are color business cards handed out on the street or left in hotel rooms, with numbers to call. There are websites for hookups, paid and unpaid. There are the traditional houses of ill repute. And there are bars lining the street, such as in Shanghai, with the bar girls openly soliciting.

So, sex for hire has hit the big cities of China since the days of Mao (and for all I know, the countryside too). There certainly is more affection exhibited in public by younger couples. There also are some sex shops on the street—I have seen 5 or 6 this time. The one I visited in Beijing a few years ago to satisfy my curiosity only sold condoms, sex potions, and lingerie.

There is no hint of homosexuality anywhere that I've seen, although an acquaintance tells me there are lots of gay bars in Beijing. I'm sure it exists, but it remains well hidden. There are very effeminate men—at the mall, as waiters, in the metro—but there is no evidence of same-sex sex. It's harder to tell with women. The girls holding hands appear more likely to be walking in complete innocence. There are definitely no transvestites, at least in the places I frequent!

The society appears to be very prudish overall. There is no sex on TV, in films (I don't know about the theaters!), on newsstands, in general commercial settings, in daily activities. The young girls blush and appear to be generally shy. The young men behave themselves. There is little sexual crime, I believe, at least relative to most other countries. The government censors and authorities seem to exert strong controls, except for the growth of some physical outlets, probably in the tacit recognition that such countervailing services are needed in the face of the significant sexual imbalance.

Finally, I go to the club Sex an da City by Beihai lake, just to see what it is. Well, it's just another bar with loud hip hop music and overpriced drinks. It is about 21:00 on a Friday and I am on my way to a live jazz club (more on that below). The only difference that I can tell between this and some other clubs/bars I've seen is that they have a long, 2-story pole for pole dancers. A tall Chinese woman with dyed blonde hair and signs of a hard life in her face appears at the half hour. She performs some PG-rated gyrations around the pole. She is dressed in a tasseled dress with all her undergarments intact. After about 10 minutes, she disappears. Earlier, when I was looking this establishment up online, I saw in a news report from a few years back that indicated that the authorities periodically checked the club to make sure that the dancers were fully clothed and no hanky panky was starting to creep in. I guess the whorehouses just pay them off.

December 15 – Foray to the Westin and the Moon

I go for an early dinner to the Westin hotel at the LiangMaQiao metro station where many of the foreign embassies are (near SanLiTun). They have a couple of pricey choices, but I find the steak house has the most interesting menu. I get a carpaccio appetizer and a veal chop with sides of onion rings and creamed spinach, and some glasses of red wines (a premium Helan cabernet from southern China, which is quite good, and an Aussie cab, which is better). The best part of the meal is the home-made bread, which looks similar to a *panzettoni*, but isn't sweet. It also comes with some delicious little spreads, a pesto and a black olive. All-in-all not bad (except for the onion rings).

In other news, the Chinese landed a rover on the moon today. *Res ipsa loquitur*.

December 16 – Sing for Your Supper

I am invited to speak at the Institute for Scientific and Technical Information of China at the Ministry of Science and Technology, by the same people who invited me to give a keynote presentation at a conference in Wuhan a couple months earlier. We talk about our institutions and focus of work. There are two areas in which we might collaborate in the future—data citation practices and related digital identifiers, and online metrics for measuring impacts in data work. We both have projects in these areas. I then give another invited presentation about “Arguments for and Against Openness in Earth Observation Data.”

After about three hours, I am given many thanks and 2000 RMB for my trouble. I should do this more often.

I go to LiangMaQiao again (where the Westin is) for a lunch meeting with a guy who is a visiting professor in the office next to mine at RADi. He is a Tamil Sri Lankan, recently retired official from the earth sciences division of UNESCO in Paris. He has a very long Indian name, so he shortens his last name to “Ish”. Ish is at RADi for 3-years focusing on remote sensing strategies for UNESCO World Heritage Sites. There are about a thousand such officially designated sites, both natural and historic, and I have been to lots of them, including in China. It is one of the better things that the UN does and one of the best that UNESCO oversees. He tells me the program was initiated by the US, although now we are not paying our UNESCO dues because they allowed Palestine to be a member in 2011 (and the US has legislation against that).

I meet Ish at an Italian restaurant, Trattoria la Gondola, which is in the Lufthansa Center (very upscale) and a part of the Kempinski Hotel there. It is across the street from the Westin. We each have a personal pizza, some Evian, Spanish crianza wine, and I have a coffee and he has a tiramisu. This fairly modest repast sets me back more than I care to say.

In any case, he says he will invite me to a World Heritage Sites workshop in southern China in May, since “a lawyer would be good to have there.” Sounds good.

December 17 – A CODATA planning meeting

I go to the CNIC China CODATA office again in Zhongguancun for a 17:00 – 18:00 meeting. We are planning a bilateral workshop in DC in June on Earth observation data policy, with two case studies, one on forest cover and carbon sequestration and the other on disaster data for response and study of storms, floods and earthquakes. Should be a useful event. I am partnering on this on the US side with the Secure World Foundation.

After the meeting at CNIC I go to SanLiTun, since Zhongguancun is already about 1/3 of the way there. The QMex restaurant is closed for a holiday party so I go to another place nearby, Ink. It is restaurant downstairs and a club upstairs. It is new and trendy, with a prix fixe menu of western food that is very good and not overpriced. I would definitely recommend it.

December 18 – Seminar on Earth observation data policy

My hosts organize a seminar with about two dozen people to discuss the topic of my white paper here. I am the only foreigner and thus the meeting is held in Chinese. GUO Huadong gives the opening speech and LI Guoqing summarizes the issues. WANG Chunyan, who I recommended, gives an overview of Chinese information law and WANG Yuanyuan summarizes the Earth observation laws and policies, such as they are. I give a reprise of my arguments for and against data sharing, with a short overview of US and international law and policy in this area. Even though I don't understand the discussion, it is very intense and goes on until 16:00. Mingmei types some notes in English for me to look at. After the meeting everyone is very complimentary and I am called "famous".

December 19 – Taxis

Nothing of note happens today, except a very good dinner back at the Westin—a *foie gras* and *canard confit* appetizer (my two favorite French dishes together (!), except the *confit* is a cold *rillettes* and thus a misnomer, but still good), a large prawn appetizer, a medley of small chocolate desserts and various wines and drinks.

I will take a few minutes to comment on taxis here. There are a lot of cabs in Beijing and they are still a bargain, at least by U.S. standards (and forget about the EU). They start at 13 RMB (about \$2) for the first 3 km and then jump at a rate of 1.2 RMB every ¼ km or so. A cab ride over about half the city will cost around \$15. It's certainly not as good a deal as the metro, particularly at rush hour, but not bad in general.

In 2008, when the city hosted the Olympics, there was much fanfare about all the cabbies learning some English, but that was a flash in the pan and almost all of them speak no other language at all. The drivers are mostly uneducated. I therefore like to bring a little map and my address in Chinese if I can. Fortunately, I know most of the northern half of the city quite well and can usually point to places I'm going. Sometimes I know it better than they.

In 2010 or so the taxi drivers went on strike in a city/country not used to such demonstrations of proletarian will ;-). They were protesting the fact that the rates had not been raised in a long time

(the meter started at 5 RMB then) and they were not making a living wage. I don't know the details, but the rates were raised.

Where I'm at now, I usually take the unauthorized gypsy cab. They charge a flat rate that is somewhat higher but still competitive. Out here in the boonies, they do not pay attention to any lanes or red lights and just barge straight ahead. And pedestrians had better watch out.

December 20 – *Jazzing it up a bit*

Not much happens at work, but I decide to go to Beihai Lake to hear some live jazz at the South Shore Jazz Club. It is a nice cozy venue overlooking the lit up lakefront. There are two acoustic quartets, one of Chinese musicians and one apparently American. Both are very good, although the one from the US is better.

I leave around 23:00 to make it back on the metro, but I only make it to my first connection before I am told to exit. Although the metro nominally runs until almost midnight, they apparently close it about a half hour before that. I am stranded along with some others on Ping'Anli boulevard. After about 10 minutes I get a cab, who figures out (with a lot of hand waving by me) how to get me back to RADI.

December 21 – *An evening at a “family spa”*

I go back for a really nice lunch at the Italian restaurant at LiangMaQiao and after that go to LIU Chuang's office. I bring her a birthday cake since I also want to thank her for paying my hotel expenses here.

We go to meet CHEN Jun to go over our two *Science* articles. They are beginning to shape up nicely. After a couple of hours, CHEN Jun invites us to a spa and massage place in which he has a membership and where he goes with his wife. The owner is Buddhist and there are the trappings of a devotee in the lobby. We have dinner there and then go to our respective male/female domains.

I have a sauna, a skin rub and a 1.5-hour massage—first full body and then foot. The massage is quite intense, so even though I am beat up I leave very relaxed afterwards. CHEN Jun claims it is the best family massage place in China. I very much doubt it, but it is nice and generous of him nonetheless.

December 22 – *Bar hopping in SanLiTun*

I go back to Timezone 8 in District 798 and have the acorn squash soup again with the pomegranate and pumpkin seeds and crème fraîche. I then get a blue cheese, walnut and apples/pear frisee salad, some Santa Rita wine, Perrier and an affogato. I read the week's International NY Times and listen to the jazz. It's become a very relaxing routine on the weekend. Too bad it takes over an hour to get there.

After lunch I decide to go to SanLiTun to explore the area some more and to identify western food restaurants for future visits. This turns into a bar hopping exercise. I first visit a German restaurant, then Mexican, then American, then a Hooters, then back to the American place for dinner and then an Irish pub, where I play pool with a guy from Nigeria. I do a bunch of window shopping along the way.

December 23 – *National insecurity*

Nothing much happens today, except I return to the German place for some bratwurst, sauerkraut, mashed potatoes and tapped German beer, all of which are just fine.

I'll take this opportunity to comment on the security apparatus, as I've seen it. As a communist country, most people who have never been here assume that it is very repressive, with a heavy security apparatus. I don't find it to be so, at least on the surface, although I'm sure that it can be most unpleasant—if you want it to be. One of the reasons that everyone is so well behaved is the fear of being snared. However, as one senior colleague here who has spent a lot of time in the West told me, if you keep clean no one will bother you. As a sometime visitor and even a Beijing denizen, I find the security quite pervasive yet unobtrusive. It is more comforting than insidious.

What I have seen is a lot of cameras everywhere. There is one in every elevator and lobby, and probably in other work areas; there is one in every subway car and multiple ones in the metro stations; I am told that there is at least one on every street corner of Beijing (and presumably elsewhere). This yields a torrent of data that I'm not sure is very well sifted. On the one hand, it gives people a sense of security and encourages them to toe the line. Real criminals are easier to identify and apprehend. On the other hand, it can be oppressive—if you think much about it. At the same time, the big cities in western democracies also have them and are probably using them more. London has been (in)famous for this for over a decade, for example, and others are catching up. *1984* comes to mind.

The ever-present cameras are bolstered by a fair number of uniformed guards. These are unevenly distributed, however, and don't seem to be more plentiful than in the US and certainly not more than in DC, which has more security people per square inch that probably anywhere else in the world, although they vie for top honors with lawyers p/s/i. The metros in particular have a couple of uniformed metro cops on each platform and they also have a metal detector machine at each entrance for scanning bags, etc. This is done as unobtrusively as possible and again, I think it's more show than substance. The metro system is very safe, however.

I also see no speed traps on the roads anywhere. I don't know if they are just well-hidden, but I suspect that they have not yet made that a routine. The cars drive pretty slowly, even when there is little traffic, but they also don't obey the street signs and lights, including driving in all directions (which is a real hazard), so infractions abound. Pedestrians don't rate.

Although one does not see hardly any cops on the street, there are always some posted at the various institutes. They are ubiquitous in the US too. The difference is that the guards here never check your ID or ask what you are doing there or who you are going to see. I am usually accompanied by a Chinese official, but not always, and even if I am escorted I am surprised that

no one looks at my ID or makes me sign in. I guess these people check your documents based on profiling, but I get the feeling that it is the *Good Soldier Schweik* mentality. At the same time I cannot complain, since I do so in the US when I'm given the third degree at some third-rate institution (for great financial price and tremendous loss of personal freedom).

I wonder if this apparent lack of preparedness or lackadaisical attitude extends generally to the armed forces. It is a volunteer army, rather than conscripted, but I don't get the feeling that they are very militaristic or aggressive as a nation, although there are some warning signs (per my TV and testosterone indicators above). Still, how many wars have the Chinese launched compared with the military incursions, both large and small, of the US?

Finally, and I find this the most annoying, are the censors at work on the internet. There are many topics and sites that are simply unavailable for political reasons, which can be a real hindrance for getting properly informed, although socially harmful sites, like pornographic and violent images, are also restricted. However, when I read the English press, like the *China Daily*, I am generally impressed with the candor and the lack of overt propaganda. This is a topic for further analysis, but I should emphasize that I am leaving after a two-month stay and after my 19th time here, and I have never been intrusively inspected or bothered. Not even once.

December 24 – Christmas Eve dinner with my friends from RADI and some thoughts on religion in a nominally communist land

It is Christmas in a non-Christian country. The Chinese have adopted many of the festive trappings without the meaning. It is a chance to decorate, to put up lights, to be festive. "Festivus for the rest of us."

I am invited by GUO Huadong and the leadership of RADI to go to dinner. A couple friends from the Chinese CODATA, LI Jianhui and ZHANG Hui, as well as LIU Chuang, are there as well. I am given some gifts—a couple of horse-themed shot glasses because 2014 is the Year of the Horse and my birth year, 1954, was also a Year of the Horse. I also get a traditional wrapped apple (I don't know what tradition it is), a stuffed Christmas gnome, and a Christmas card from LIU Chuang, who is the only Christian in the bunch.

We have a very nice dinner and everyone gives toasts, particularly to me. I too express my gratitude and friendship. LIU Chuang talks for the umpteenth time about the LIN Chao Geomuseum (which I helped launch) and it is very much a worthwhile and innovative portal, even if her description has been described many times. LIN Chao was a famous Chinese geographer and LIU Chuang's Ph.D. mentor. She also says she is a Christian in her toast and says that it represents peace and harmony. We all can toast to that.

Since it's Christmas Eve, I would like to put down some thoughts about religion. I have written in other earlier travelogues about my superficial, touristic experiences in Buddhist temples, lamaseries and some churches. Organized religion is very much repressed by the secular State. It is seen as a direct challenge to political legitimacy and thus must either be greatly minimized or controlled by the government. It is at bottom two dogmas vying for power, with communist ideology here at the top.

The government tolerates religion, but only if it can control it. It therefore appoints its own Dalai Lama, its own Catholic bishops, and the like. I have been mostly to the lamaseries and temples, most often only as historical structures rather than operating institutions. It is similar to the cathedrals and chapels in the increasingly atheistic Europe, where I have visited many more churches.

There are monks in some temples and they sometimes have monasteries attached to them, particularly in western China. The Buddhist monks are the leaders of the separatist movements in Tibet and less so in other provinces (QingHai, Sichuan, Yunnan). They are therefore viewed as counterrevolutionary and politically dangerous. They are incarcerated and harassed. The monks have self-immolated themselves in the last few years in ultimate protest. The whole situation is nasty, brutish and (not) short.

Also out west there are quite a few Muslims, especially in the farthest province bordering on Kyrgyzstan. They too are restless, particularly in the provincial capital of Urumqi. I don't know much about this, except what I read in the local and (our) western press, and I know that the authorities consider the violent protests and occasional bombings as terrorist acts. They use very strong military and police force and control. They also have an active pacification program in which they encourage hordes of Han Chinese to move there and to other parts of western China, including Tibet, presumably with a lot of economic incentives in the hope of overwhelming the local "nationalities" and quelling the discontent. They are generally throwing money at this by building up the infrastructure, but it's not easily amenable to economic solutions since it's at heart cultural and religious, and hence political.

There are few churches in China. It is not a Christian culture to begin with and most churches were destroyed in the Mao years. I saw a couple in the countryside around Xi'an a decade ago. This time, I see two in Beijing—a traditional, old one (looked Byzantine, with two coupolas) on WangFuJing Street near the heart of Beijing, and a larger, modern one in Zhongguancun. LIU Chuang says they are mobbed at Christmas and that the U.S. presidents go to the one on WangFuJing when they come for state visits.

I was walking by that one late in this trip, so I stopped in to see what's what. The architecture inside was nothing special (unlike some of the temples and lamaseries I have visited), but there was some kind of service going on, apparently being led by a state-appointed female minister. She had a microphone and was walking around the congregation, asking the parishioners in the pews questions and having them respond using the microphone. I was unable to determine what they were discussing, but it had the look and feel of a TV game show, or more likely a public confessional, or if you really want to be cynical, a political re-education camp. Outside there was a crowd on the plaza, looking on at some teenagers who were dancing to hip-hop blaring from small speakers...

I not been Christian for a longtime (if I ever was) and consider myself to be a spiritual agnostic. In law school I dabbled in Taoism and wrote out the Tao te Ching by hand in order to better understand it. It's more a philosophy of life than a spiritual guide. A lot of it is anachronistic (like the Bible and other books of the "great religions"), but there is a great deal of wisdom as

well. I actually find that the first line of the Tao te Ching, which I've learned by heart, succinctly sums up my views of organized religion: "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao."

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the Falun Gong. This is some kind of spiritual movement that has arisen since the 1990s. I do not know much about it, either. It is quite small and considered highly dangerous by the government, since they are unable to control it. There are protests and demonstrations held periodically in Washington, and websites and flyers in the U.S. with gruesome pictures and descriptions of persecution, torture and death.

The only thing I am confident about is that the dogmatists, whether secular or religious, will continue to fight it out.

December 25 – *Have yourself a merry polluted Christmas*

The air pollution levels according to one website that tracks the pollution levels in Chinese cities has been "Hazardous" for the past two days. The fine particulates (2.5 microns) is at 332, with over 50 considered to be the level at which one goes from "Good" to "Moderate". At over 300 there is a "health alert" where "everyone may experience more serious health effects." The air is milky white on a clear, sunny day. One can see some blue sky directly above and I hope the winds come back soon. But I have also seen Beijing worse than this.

I call Ma and Alex to wish them a merry Christmas and spend most of the day searching the web for things to do and places to go in Beijing. One thing I find is that there are multiple ski areas all over China, although none of them looks all that great. I have a staff meeting scheduled for 15:00 to discuss my white paper, which is now about 70 pages, but that gets moved to the following week. I therefore pack it in and head out for SanLiTun on the 4:30 shuttle to the metro to find a Christmas meal. As if on cue, the wind really picks up and blows away the air pollution, so we all get our present.

I go to an American restaurant, the Union Bar & Grill, and get a very good half rack of baby-back pork ribs, French fries and cole slaw, with Guinness stout. I get back to the hotel early.

December 26 – *A couple of off-site meetings*

In the morning I go to LIU Chuang's annual LIN Chao shindig. This all-day event, the second one, is attended by over 100 people, some of them national luminaries. The first Chinese explorer of the Antarctic gives a great presentation. I can't understand what he's saying, but the slides are good.

I am the only non-Chinese present, so the meeting is held understandably in Mandarin. I give a few remarks in English and go on to another meeting that afternoon with ZHANG Xiaolin, the director of the National Science Library at CAS. I have known Xiaolin for about a decade and been invited to several meetings by him. He got his doctorate in library and information science from Columbia University. He speaks very good English and knows what's going on. I like him a lot.

We talk for well over an hour about the open access movement in the U.S. He then invites me to an “authentic” Sichuan restaurant, since he’s from that province. The food is quite good, if a bit wild. On the adventuresome side, I eat some filleted frogs cooked in oil, literally swimming in it. They serve that with slices of white bread, meant only for soaking up the oil—not for eating! I also eat some sliced pork that is cooked with a lot of peppercorns. I have never has this dish before and the sauce is somewhat sour, but the peppercorns numb my tongue even though they are not particularly hot. I eschew the bowl of pork in pork blood....

December 27 – *A nation of diplomats*

The French have a great aphorism:

A diplomat says “yes” if he means maybe, “maybe” when he means no, and if he says “no” he is not a diplomat. A woman of the world says “no” if she means maybe, “maybe” if she means yes, and if she says “yes” she’s not a woman of the world.

The Chinese are a nation of diplomats. For various reasons—cultural, social, political—they are loath to say “no.” This is good if you are a visitor, but bad for the country. Not all bad, since it makes life more pleasant, but also less efficient, less innovative and less adventuresome, in general. A nation of “yes men” is not what you want, although the dictatorship is reassured, which is my point.

Yet the country has made more economic progress in one generation than just about anyone, and certainly the largest country to do so. I would credit that to sheer industriousness, a drive to succeed and a no-nonsense ethos that exudes a positive perspective. The Chinese feel good about themselves and about their future (I can cite a recent survey by the *Economist* to that effect).

Contrast that with the national malaise that we are experiencing in the US. We are certainly not diplomats. We tell the world how to behave and enforce it when they don’t behave, but we have ourselves forgotten how to behave. We are frank, brash, and (sometimes) foolish. Unlike most other countries, however, we are risk-takers and are not afraid to fail and learn (sometimes) from our mistakes. Unlike the Chinese political and cultural collectivism, Americans are individualistic, to a fault.

Those same traits are reflected in our educational systems. What’s interesting is that the Chinese are at the top of the class in almost every educational setting in the US. Unfortunately (for them), their educational system is not very good (except Shanghai and Hong Kong top all international charts) and they emphasize memorization and the herd mentality, over creativity and critical thinking. Like the Japanese 40 years before them, they copy but don’t innovate. At the same time, they are generally driven and hard-working, and we are generally soft and lazy, hence I posit their success in our system.

I don’t want to make this into a lengthy comparative analysis, but you get the idea. And tell me if I’m wrong.

December 28 – *A home cooked meal*

I go for the last time to the Timezone 8 café in District 798, but this time it is not very good. The service is lousy. The Mongolian manager has not been there the last few times and I think the staff is slipping without adequate supervision. Well, I guess I'll see on future travel to Beijing.

After lunch, I go to LIU Chuang's office to work on our *Science* article and on organizing the workshop in Kenya. After a couple of hours she suggests that I come over for dinner, since her brother and sister-in-law are visiting from northeast China. They are making home-made boiled stuffed dumplings and cook a lot of other dishes, including roast pork and chicken, sautéed broccoli, peanuts, and some pu'er tea, red wine and Beijing vodka. It is very nice and the people are warm and genuine.

December 29 – *Shopping at the Hong Qiao market*

I need to get some gifts, so I go to an old standby—the *Hong Qiao*, or Pearl, market. This holds a large number of independently owned shops under one roof. It has the look of a traditional department store, but you very much need to haggle. I neither like to haggle nor am I good at it. I use the tactic of walking away and taking the last price they offer. I'm sure it's not the lowest, but it's a lot lower than the initial asking price. I figure if I get down to 30 or 40%, I am not getting ripped off too badly and I don't have the patience to wring the last dime out of each vendor. I am told that I should not pay more than 10% of the initial price, but I am not so mercenary and they are. That's why the Chinese are the business and trade class in most countries they settle.

I take the goods back to the hotel and turn right around and go for my first of two meals at TRB, which is perhaps the best restaurant I have ever eaten at. This merits its own write up, so see my January 1 entry, below, for both meals.

December 30 – *Thoughts about the lack of trust*

China has come a long way since the Mao years. In a few short decades it has emerged as an economic powerhouse, built an impressive infrastructure and raised the standard of living for many of its people. There is a general optimism here. But there are still some shortcomings and one of those is in trust.

I was not going to write about this until a Chinese friend of mine, who shall remain nameless here, pointed it out. There is a trust deficit that is both national and international. Despite the apparent happiness, optimism and confidence that the future will be better, I believe that those sentiments are thin and can be easily shattered.

If you read this whole travelogue, you will recognize what I mean. A new mother wants infant powdered milk from the U.S., because she doesn't trust the formula that's made in China. Another colleague eats her lunches at McDonalds because the food is of a known standard (low!) and therefore can be trusted. There are many other examples of a lack of trust in food (including by me).

One also assumes that everyone is trying to scam you—whether it’s in the prices that they charge, or the quality of the merchandise, or some other deficiency that can be passed on. The waiters complain that they don’t get the 15% service fee that some of the establishments charge. But that itself may not be true and it is the waiters who may be trying to scam you (I don’t know but it’s bad either way). I have even been told that there are false eggs—that someone made something that looks like an egg out of cheaper substances! The scam is a way of life in most developing countries, but colors all business transactions.

The same is true of the general economy, which is very uneven and which is almost certainly at the cusp of a real estate and credit bubble that will be most unpleasant when it bursts. The social contract with the populace is that the government can say what it wants as long as tomorrow is materially better than yesterday.

Indeed, the government regularly lies or minimizes or does not disclose a lot of facts---about everything. This is not always known or apparent—especially the withholding of information—but everyone knows of many such instances and thus it breeds a certain level of distrust. This also extends to a whitewashing of history, particularly the Mao years, which those who lived through it know is not true.

The nation is portrayed as wealthier, healthier, cleaner, stronger than it actually is and so the government is not believed. In short, China would not do well in Missouri (The Show Me State, for those of you who need explaining).

The lack of governmental “truthiness,” as Steven Colbert would say, colors China’s international relations as well. The lies of the ruling class are probably even better known outside the country, where information is comparatively freer. However, a major additional problem is the theft of intellectual property and the copying of technologies and products, just as Japan did 40-50 years ago. Censorship of the media does not help.

As a result of this palpable lack of trust in the Chinese government and in businesses, the country has not achieved membership in the clubs of the super-rich, such as the World Trade Organization or the IMF leadership, even though it is now the second largest economy in the world. Its citizens must get visas to travel to all the OECD countries and are frequently denied that privilege. The country generally does not have a level of trust commensurate with its supposed status in the world community.

Even in my own area of public science, which I know well, the Chinese are known for hiding their data, plagiarizing their articles, inflating their findings and generally not behaving with the same norms of integrity that are prevalent in other OECD nations.

All this is recognized and is slowly improving, but still has a long way to go.

December 31 – *New Year’s Eve in Beijing*

It’s really not New Year’s evening, since that is a Western calendar tradition. Nevertheless, I feel obligated to go somewhere, so I go to a steakhouse in SanLiTun. I call it my minute steak dinner. I order a martini straight up, a steak and baked potato and a glass of cabernet. I get the martini and the wine at once and visit the bathroom for about 3 minutes. The steak dinner is served about

2 minutes later. The dinner is not very good, but the service is efficiently Chinese. I have a nightcap and take the metro back to the hotel and am asleep before midnight.

January 1 – *Art in China and the fabulous TRB (also art)*

I am not an artist, but I enjoy art. I have been to museums and galleries all over the world and have visited a few museums in my travels here, so I do have some exposure and appreciation of the fine arts—the paintings, sculpture, ceramics. I also have written at some length about the modern art I have seen in District 798 (see above).

There are other forms of art, of course. I cannot judge the literature, since I don't speak the language, and I have seen very few films, which have not impressed me. Television is OK.

I have heard traditional music, both live and recorded; Chinese opera (live), which I wrote about in my 1992 travelogue; live rock (in Taipei) and recorded rock (mostly on TV); and live jazz (in Taipei and Beijing). It's all technically good, but not outstanding, in my view. I am not a Chinese opera aficionado.

The art that has impressed me most, except the modern art in District 798, has been the various handicrafts. These are usually very skillful and cheap, given the labor and talent that goes into them.

On this New Year's day I go to the National Art Gallery on DongZe West, near the city center. I spend well over an hour and went on all the floors. The first floor has calligraphy, which I don't understand and which I have seen exhibits of elsewhere. It seems to be a very popular and ancient art form. Also on the first floor are some abstract landscapes and very large paintings of mountains, Guilin style, which are pretty much all the same (and by the same artist).

On the second floor is an exhibition of paintings from the west of China. Some of the paintings are very amateurish, lacking in technique. It is a historical collection, featuring art by and about the western "nationalities" (including Tibet) and the landscapes. I have been to some of the areas portrayed by the artists and they appear to be accurate. What may be less accurate is that the people depicted are almost always smiling, even when shown doing menial labor. A lot of the art has the aura of propaganda and political undercurrents—whether in the subject matter chosen or the way it is portrayed, and no doubt put together in the exhibition. It is interesting nonetheless.

On the final, third floor, which is also the smallest, the exhibit is all about Mao. By subject and execution ;-) it is very political, of course. Mao is glorified as the paternalistic and pensive father figure, great leader, hero of the revolution, blah blah blah. The fact that he was a mass-murdering tyrant does not enter a single brush stroke. It is pure propaganda. I assume the exhibit has been put together as a commemoration of his 120th birthday. A much larger exhibit depicting his victims on the anniversary of his death is still in the distant future...

After this I go down WangFuJing Street, which intersects DongZe Avenue close to the museum. WangFuJing is sort of the main shopping street, with a pedestrian mall and fancy shops and department stores. It has changed tremendously since the first time I went to Beijing in 1992 (see

my travel notes from that trip). There is a huge Apple store that is mobbed. I go through a foreign bookstore and buy some more gifts in an adjacent tourist trap.

I then walk down a well-known (to me) side street by the famous (no hyperbole here) 5-story Quan Jude Duck Restaurant, where I've eaten several times before. The street goes on to the PMUC (the Peking Medical University Center), the premier hospital in Beijing (other than the PLA General Hospital). As an aside, I've been for meetings to both and know doctors in each. I then make a loop and go to the Beijing Hotel, where I stayed in 1992, and the adjacent and connected Grand Hotel. Both are really overpriced and devoid of customers.

I go on to Tiananmen Square, but make a right turn before the Forbidden City and go up a street to some adjacent hutong neighborhood. There are some shops along the way, mostly junk, but there is one original ceramic shop where I buy some handmade sake/tea cups for Meimei and me.

I get back to DongZe boulevard and it is time to go back to the fabulous TRB—the Temple Restaurant Beijing. I read the week before in the *International NY Times* that the *Maïson Boulud* in the old U.S. Embassy building has closed. The article noted that this left 2 or 3 exclusive western food restaurants in Beijing and TRB is one of them. I did not go to the *Maïson Boulud*, but have been twice to Aria in the Shangri-la Hotel and Barolo in the Ritz-Carleton, both top-notch places described in earlier travelogues. TRB, however, is a cut above the rest and in my many travels and eateries this is the best restaurant I've gone to since I went to *Tantris* in Munich in 1987 (the old Magnolia Grill in Durham, NC still gets honorable mention and best value per buck of anywhere I've ever been).

I will describe what I had and the ambience, but there is no way to do it justice. I invite the reader to look up TRB on its website. According the *NY Times*, the restaurant was opened in 2012 by Ignace Leclaire, who was a chef at Daniel in NY and then opened *Maïson Boulud* in Beijing. It is a minimalist place with straight lines painted in grey, white and black, but quite comfortable at the table.

When I first went there on Sunday, December 29, I went on my way to *Hong Qiao* market (see above) during the daytime so that I could find it in the dark. This was a good idea, since the restaurant is well-hidden in a *hutong* area, and not easy to find even with explicit directions. I decided to have a very small lunch—just a *fettucine alfredo*, a glass of Italian red wine and a bread basket. This little snack set me back about \$50. The *fettucine* were home-made and not drowned in a heavy cream sauce. The size of the dish was what you might expect of an appetizer. The glass of red wine was topped off, so it came to about two regular glasses, but still. In any case, I made the reservation for dinner at 19:30. I arrived a little early and had one of their original cocktails, a ginger-infused, Negroni-type of concoction which was very good and which was accompanied by a set of little ethereal cheese puffs (*gougères*) that were baked, light and delicious. I told the bartender how to make the vermouth and Campari drink that my grandfather invented. He made it right away and we tried it.

I then went to dinner, which was the *prix fixe* Winter menu of 4 + 1 courses and wine pairings. This menu actually was not on their website, so I was not prepared to have it, but it jumped out at

me as what I wanted the most. It began with several small *amuse bouche* tidbits—a fish mousse with some roe and a green sauce, little square strudels, one with beets and the other with house-cured salmon, and then another set of the *gougères*.

The Winter menu had a choice of two dishes at each stage. The first two courses were appetizers (could have been a soup), then a main and a dessert. I got fish for the first two dishes. These were a gravlax with all the egg and caper trimmings and a horseradish creme, and then smoked sturgeon, caviar, crème fraîche and blinis. They were paired with a glass of Greek Ga'ia Notios and a French Alligoté bourgogne. Both wines were excellent, but I really liked the Greek one, which the *sommelier* described as having a salty sea flavor. It reminded me of a Spanish white wine from the Pyrenees which I had at *Komi*, supposedly the best restaurant in Washington, DC, and which was described (and tasted) the same way.

For the main I had a *canard confit* with an orange braised endive and a celery root puree. The dish was superb, but was paired with a New Zealand Pyramid *pinot noir* that was one of the best red wines that I've ever had. This course was truly delicious.

I then added a cheese course. They brought a cart of cheese out and I had basically one bite of all dozen types they had there, all different kinds, including some made in China. They were all very good to excellent and were served with some *confitures* and baked wafers. The *sommelier* suggested an Australian shiraz to accompany this, which was very good but could not beat my recollection of the New Zealand wine I had just had in the course before.

I was already full after the cheese course, which was quite substantial, but I still had an *Opéra* mousse to eat for dessert, which was accompanied with a dessert wine. I completed the repast with a really good coffee with a choice of several dark and white chocolate truffles. All of this was accompanied by a sparkling water. The whole dinner, including my time in the bar before, took almost 3 hours. I took a taxi back to the hotel, since it was too late to take the metro.

On New Year's day, I reprised the dinner at TRB, but this time I ordered *à la carte*. I started with another original cocktail in the bar area. In the dining area, I had the same *amuse bouches*, but this time accompanied by a glass of gratis Schramsburg brut. The *sommelier* suggested wine pairings, although they were *à la carte* as well. For the appetizer I ordered the lobster salad, with pomelo and avocado, with which I had the Greek wine again. This was followed by a fig salad with walnuts and light greens in a lemon vinaigrette. The salad was very good, but not exceptional. The salad was paired with a French rosé that was very good, but not exceptional (are any rosés exceptional?).

I had difficulty in choosing between the suckling pig and slow-cooked beef rib for the main course, but settled on the beef rib. However, the waiter brought me both, with the pork being “on the house”. The suckling pig was a piece of tender pork covered with a separate crisp skin, pureed acorn squash, roasted Brussel sprouts, bacon and maple glaze. This was paired with an Austrian Gruner Veltliner, that I would not have picked, but the *sommelier* said it would be really good with it and it was. The all-day braised beef short rib, with caramelized carrots, bread dumplings and burdock (?) chips was absolutely incredible, and I ordered a reprise of the NZ Pyramid *pinot noir* that also was delicious.

Needless to say, even though the portions were not very large, they were quite rich and I was too stuffed to order a dessert, much less the cheese course, although I would not have done that anyway. Since they served great home-made chocolate truffles with the coffee, I had three of those again.

I take the metro home, but I am cutting it close and my connection on Line 13 is closed. I take a gypsy cab who apparently only knows the local area and he gets lost, despite my knowledgeable gesticulations. After an inordinate amount of time he finally gets me to the Xi'erqi metro where I find another gypsy cab to take me the rest of the way.

January 2 – *The last supper*

On Thursday I go to a Peking duck house in Zhongguancun. It is a nice old house in the middle of new and impressive high rises. I am accompanied by three of the China CODATA staff, LIU Chuang and LI Guoqing. It is very pleasant but the food is not as good as at the real Peking duck joint.

January 3 – *A new chapter in my life*

I get up early and pack. I have two bulging suitcases, plus a heavy knapsack and a musical instrument for Pa Stan. I nonetheless leave a lot of stuff as gifts for the maids and throw a lot of other stuff out.

I have a meeting at 10:30 with Yuanyuan, the researcher for the Chinese Earth observation data policy at RADI. We go over her results, which are not very substantial and still in Chinese. I hope that this is rectified in the coming weeks, since I want to finish the report by the spring.

It is a warm, sunny day with low pollution. There has been zero precipitation in my two months here. My guess is that the desertification in northern China will continue, with great socioeconomic dislocation. Sometime in the future I see Beijing surrounded by sand. They already have sand storms in the spring.

I leave for the airport a few minutes after 15:00 and just before the weekend rush. I am in the Air China business lounge, with my ticket, through security and customs in just over an hour, which is close to a record. I calculate that I have now spent about 4 months of my life in Beijing and another 2 months elsewhere in China. Since Beijingers have recently been estimated to live about 15 years less because of the pollution, I figure that should cost me about a month in longevity, but I wouldn't trade it to get it back. I have written a song about the city (separately).

Now I am really looking forward to getting back and starting a new life with Meimei. However, one thing is for sure from my trip this time...

Ich bin ein Beijinger!

COSTA RICA

Notes from Costa Rica: “Tales of el Gringo”
January 2024
by
P.F. Uhler

I’ve wanted to visit Costa Rica for at least a couple of decades, having heard only positive things about it. My main introduction came in the 2003-04 time frame when I was the lead consultant to the first review of the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) in Copenhagen. I learned then about Costa Rica’s forward-looking biodiversity preserves and ecotourism. So here I am. I’ve rented a really nice AirBnB by Garabito Beach near the Pacific and just north of Jaco Beach.



The first 2 nights I'm in San Jose, the capital city, at the Crowne Plaza just north of La Sabana park and close to the city center. It's a largish metropolis of about 350,000, in a country of over 5 million and about the size of Connecticut. The city is ringed by mountains in what is a very mountainous country, so it is scenic in the distance even if there's a haze that blocks much of the view. I am subsequently told that it's dust, but it is all over the country.

San Jose itself is generally unremarkable for tourists. The center of the city is a large pedestrian zone filled with normal shops and some homeless people. I walked up and down the center on two different occasions but have nothing to show for it, except a bottle of sun block.

There are several museums that may all be interesting, but two art museums were closed for an extended time and I didn't go to the National Museum (see picture) for lack of time.



I did go to the Jade Museum which was very well curated and worth visiting.



I also saw the National Theater, which was quite ornate and in the same area.



I then had an excellent lunch at the Gran Hotel de Costa Rica, a Hilton, that's kitty corner to the theater. I did not see the central market or artisan market because they were further away, although I did have a great dinner at the Grano de Oro restaurant in a boutique hotel by the same name. That's about it, as far as the capital city goes.

There are two more city features that bear mentioning. The first is that there are cavernous drainage ditches on each corner between the sidewalk and the street. You will be sure to regret it if you don't pay attention. The second is that the sidewalks are covered with dried guano under each tree, a reminder of the country's vaunted biodiversity.

There happens to be an Avis rental car office around the corner from my hotel and since I have a car reserved with them at the airport it is more convenient to pick it up by the hotel. After a bit of haggling about car insurance and gas tank levels, I get on my Waze/Google Maps and head out of town. The car costs almost as much as my very nice AirBnB, but I plan to get my money's worth. Like most trips I take, I drive all over the place like a fiend and rack up the mileage. More on that later.

There is a highway with several tolls going out of town toward the coast. After about 20 minutes it becomes a 2-lane road, with a 3rd passing lane going up hills. It is appropriate to mention the transportation infrastructure at this point since it's something I have to deal with throughout my trip.

I have a Frommer's guide from the late 1990s that some friends of mine in Las Vegas gave me. Although dated, the geography doesn't change and neither does the road infrastructure, apparently. As the Frommer's guide states:

Road conditions in San Jose and throughout the country became a political issue in 1995, after years of corruption and neglect in the Transportation Ministry had caused the roads to deteriorate to the point that local newspapers were running contests to find the largest potholes. There was no lack of contenders. Despite the uproar and indignation, and political promises to the contrary, little relief or repair work has been done...

Fast-forward 30 years and not that much has changed. There are no large highways to speak of, except a few on San Jose's periphery. The primary roads are all two lanes, the secondary roads are mostly paved but may have potholes, and the other roads are usually unpaved and dangerous. The speed limits are an anemic 80, 60, and 40 kms/hr. Nothing higher than 80 km (50/mph). VelociDad takes that as a suggestion since there are practically no police to check it. Of course, the speed is mitigated by the heavy traffic, the hilly and curvy roads, and the general lack of shoulders and steep side terrains that would spell disaster for anyone not paying attention—kinda like the city drainage ditches, but a lot worse. Moreover, the signage is inconsistent and in many cases missing, which affected me several times. It's a constant challenge, especially if you are driving over 4,000 kms over a month.

The 40 km limits are worth saying something more about. They mostly are there for going through towns and for school zones, which is all perfectly understandable. However, there is a school zone every 5 feet it seems and I have never seen a student-aged kid in any of them (I went

online and found out they are on vacation between mid-December and February, their summer, so never mind). In short, for a country that is overflowing with tourists and tax income, improving the infrastructure would be a good investment.

There are other infrastructure problems, however, which remind you that you are still in a developing country after all. So, the electricity goes off for a brief time periodically. The water went off three times, fortunately not for very long. The AirBnB I have is well-furnished and equipped, but the workmanship is spotty. The apartment has a millipede infestation (not a big deal), but I find a few crawling on the floor every day. Most important, the last 4 kms of the road I'm on that goes to the beach and to ritzy communities is unpaved and in very poor condition. It also has a lot of traffic, including many large construction trucks and some big buses. A side road like this should have some priority for the state/province.

During the first week I cooked almost all of my meals, which also meant that I went shopping for the food. The kitchen had everything I needed, so it wasn't a problem. The food was hit or miss, however. On the plus side, were various fruits—delicious papayas, melons, pineapples, limes (which they call limons, but they don't have yellow lemons, only the limes). The vegetables are of mixed quality, with great green peppers and most other veggies. However, the tomatoes were surprisingly not good and the peppers I saw were only the regular green kind (no hot ones!). In general, the choices and varieties of the produce were quite limited and the markets (I went to 4 different kinds) were basic. There were not any more varieties in the farmers' markets either. I was quite disappointed, and the expected cornucopia didn't materialize, unfortunately. I only bought one meat—a steak from grass-fed beef—from Nicaragua, which was better than I expected.

After about a week of cooking my own meals, I got tired of that and started to go out, except for small breakfasts and great local coffee. I was warned by people who had been here and by the literature not to expect much regarding the cooked food. I have to say they were wrong, probably because it was in the past and the situation has changed. Also, the basic restaurants in small towns were in fact quite bad (I went to a couple), but if you go to basic restaurants in small towns in many countries you shouldn't expect much either. It's true that the variety of restaurants is not great, but if you like seafood and especially raw fish—either sashimi or ceviche—this is the place for you. I had raw fish at the first 4 restaurants I went to, already in San Jose, and frequently after that. I even ate fish cooked ;-). There also were very good tacos of all kinds and complex dishes in high-end places that were quite good, but expensive. The cooking was of fine quality almost everywhere and the choices were generally plentiful, at least in San Jose and the tourist areas, where I hung out.

As to drinks, I didn't have very much alcohol since I was trying to lose some weight, but the few local beers I had were mass-produced and pedestrian (except for the Classico Imperial, which was quite good when ice cold) and there was no domestic wine. Where available, all the wine was imported, mostly from Chile and Argentina, and quite good. There appeared to be a premium put on cocktails in most restaurants and the few drinks that I did have were very nice. I mostly drank water, con gaz. San Pellegrino.

However, I read and was also told that Costa Rica was inexpensive. Maybe if you are inland (except in San Jose) you will find some cheap prices, but I had unanticipated sticker shock. And this included most everything--the groceries and other items in stores, the restaurants, the tours, the rental car, the gas, my AirBnB. Overall, I would say the prices were about the same or higher than in the US or even EU. However, I spoke with someone from Bogota, who said the prices were lower in Costa Rica than in Colombia. Must be the exchange rate (I went online and indeed, the exchange rate has a lot to do with it).

As to my touristic pursuits, I did quite a bit. What follows is a litany of activities I undertook and places I visited, all with some pictures attached. Many of the locations were biodiversity preserves and national parks. In fact, there has been a proliferation of such places after the initial successes of ecotourism here over the past few decades, so a lot of institutions have jumped on the bandwagon and some, such as hotels and even parks, are reputed to be scams or at least misrepresented. Because the country is very mountainous and biodiverse, there are many scenic locations, including forests and waterfalls.

I first went to a nearby zipline and ATV place, which was great big fun. There are many zipline opportunities in Costa Rica and this one had 10 lines, some overlooking the ocean.



I then went on an ATV, which ended up being a private tour.



I did a lot of swimming, about every 3 days in the ocean and few times in fresh water. The beach was about a 15-minute walk and the ocean water about 85F degrees (I looked it up), so there was no problem getting in.



I walked to the beach, because driving and parking were crowded and expensive. The water was not clear, but I think it was mostly naturally turbid.

I drove to the Monteverde cloud forest and did some nature exploring.





There was a touristic town nearby and the road was very scenic and paved, but with some cavernous potholes.

I also went to the small Mountain Top forest with a bunch of hanging bridges, above the Manuel Antonio national park and beach, which I drove to see but didn't stay at.



It was past the town of Quepos, about 1.5 hours from my place and that had an upscale marina, with shops and open-air restaurants that were quite delightful.



I then went snorkeling at Isla Tortuga, about a 45-minute boat ride from another nice marina near me.



The snorkeling was not very good because of the turbid water and the lack of coral, but it was something to do. I also went on a short banana boat excursion and a short hike, where there were some not-so-wild boars.

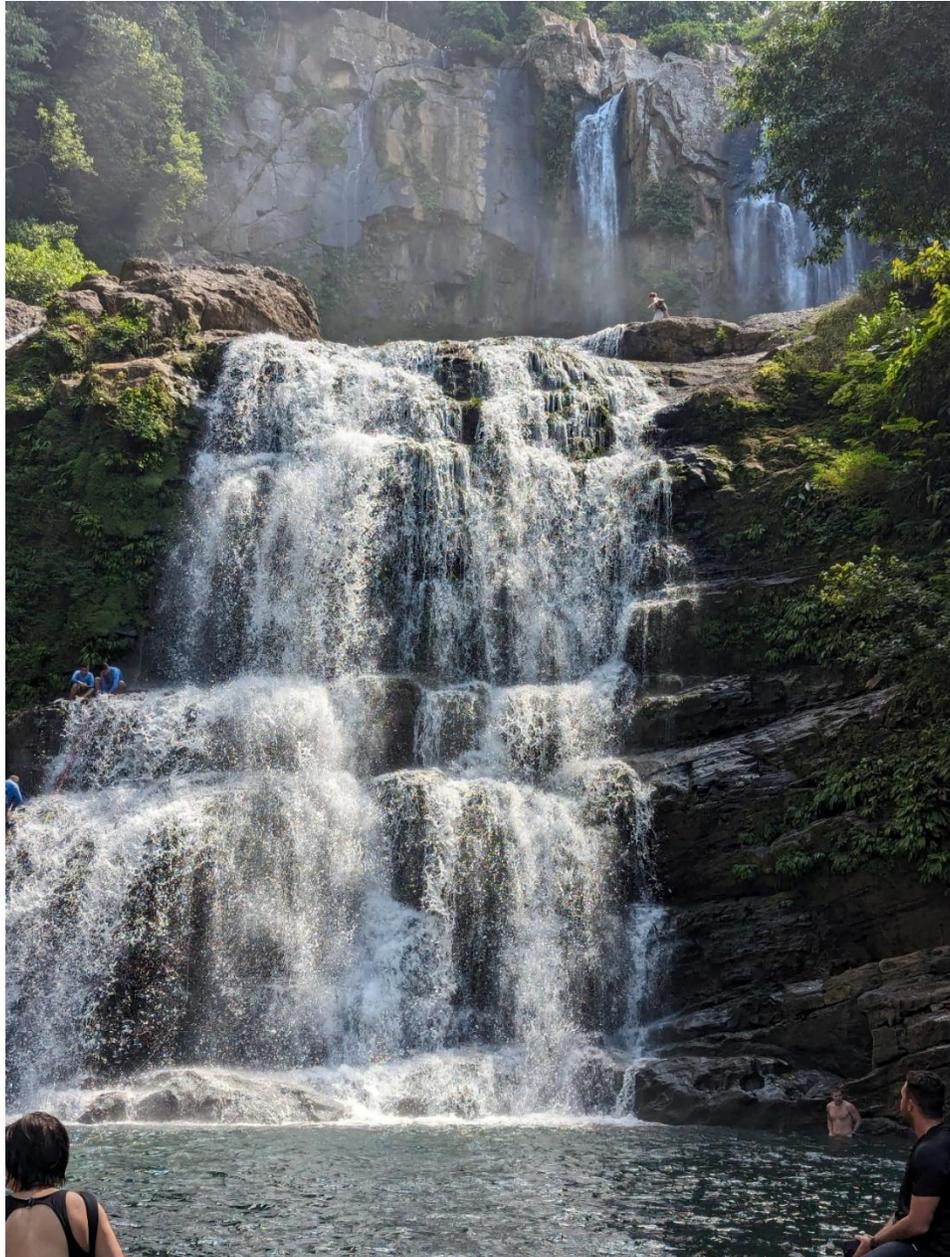


The second and third weekends I watched the American NFL football playoffs, with 6 games and then 4. I watched the early games on my TV at home and then went to local restaurants, mostly at the Marriott Los Suenos resort, which had a very good but expensive steakhouse.



Another all-day excursion was to the Nauyaca Waterfalls, which were very beautiful and a lot of fun.





I'm glad I took a jeep ride once I was at the main entrance, which not only saved time but would have involved a boring and arduous walk on a dirt road. I went swimming at the falls and then went to a local craft-beer brewery and restaurant that was very good.

I also went on an overnight trip to Golfito on the southern end of SW Costa Rica. The swimming pool at the resort I stayed at was particularly good and I spent a lot of time there.



However, I got lost a couple of times going there because I misplaced my phone (and GPS), fortunately in my car, and the signs and directions (well, you know). This included a short and unanticipated visit to the Panama border. It was a long trip over two days, but I saw a lot.

Upon my return, I visited a monkey farm, that had Capucin monkeys in the wild.



Meimei flew down for the last 5 days and I picked her up at the San Jose airport.



We drove down that day to the Arenal Volcano and stayed at a resort for two days. The resort had hot spring pools and a decent restaurant.

We spent all the next day climbing to and from a waterfall where we swam, visited an Indian tourist outpost where I bought a mask, then climbed part of the way to the volcano, and also went to some excellent local hot springs.









It was a lot of fun, but exhausting. We ended the day at a fine Italian restaurant in the nearby town of La Fortuna.

We drove from Arenal to my place in Garabito the following day, which was a very scenic ride, swimming in the ocean upon arrival and then going to one of the best restaurants in Jaco.



The only full day and my last one at the beach was fun as well. We went on a local 3-hour, but very steep, tour of about a dozen waterfalls. There was a lot of rope climbing and hand-holding on rocks, some swimming, and beautiful scenery.



At the end of the day, we went to a nearby 5-star hotel on top of a mountain, where I'd been several times before, and saw a beautiful sunset while having dinner.





The last full day, I checked out of my AirBnB in the morning and drove to San Jose.

We stayed at the Crowne Plaza again and walked around the center of town (again), this time finding the city's small Chinatown.



However, we went back early and Meimei won some money in the hotel casino, while I watched the first championship NFL game (Chiefs vs. Ravens), which was surprisingly boring and unexpectedly won by the Chiefs. I didn't see the second game (Lions vs. 49ers), which was apparently much more exciting, but we went instead to another very fine dinner at the Grano de Oro restaurant.

The final morning, on the way to the airport, I saw a dead motorcyclist under a van, fortunately with a blanket draped over his body but a lot of blood on the pavement. Very gruesome. Then in the customs line at the airport, someone collapsed just a few passengers in front of me, perhaps from a stroke. It was not an auspicious beginning to my trip back!

If I go to Costa Rica again, I wouldn't stay in one AirBnB like I did this time but would travel to the north of the country on the pacific coast, more volcanoes in the center, and visit the whole Caribbean coast. That trip would also probably take a month.

CUBA

**Notes from Havana
(Busquando Fidel)
September 2009
by
P.F. Uhler**

I am on my way to Havana on September 5, 2009 between two major hurricanes, both of which hit Cuba directly. [look up and expand]

I am attending an international workshop focused on Open Access to Scientific Data and Information in Developing Countries, hosted by the Academia de Ciencias de Cuba (the ACC, or Cuban Academy of Sciences) and co-organized by a program of the Inter-Academy panel on Scientific Issues (IAP), which I direct. Although most U.S. citizens still cannot travel to Cuba, there are categories of exceptions for certain purposes. One of those exceptions is for an international conference or meeting that is organized by an international organization (i.e., me).

I have gotten the necessary blessings from our Treasury Department, which appears to be rather blasé about such matters and in any case has no formal paperwork. They tell me to keep proof of the international nature of the meeting for five years, which has almost transpired at the time of this writing. In any case, it is very much an international meeting, with participants not only from Cuba and the U.S., but, if my memory serves me, from Canada, Brazil, Colombia, China, Germany, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Ukraine, and the U.K. It is a nice group of people, most of whom I have met at other foreign venues before and who are all expert in the management and policy of publicly funded scientific information.

The itinerary takes me from National Airport in Washington to Miami, where I change planes to an American Eagle flight to Havana. Although it has been identified as some “charter” company, the flight is very much an official segment of American Airlines. The charter flight must be a legal fiction with a middleman for appearances only.

I am the only gringo on the small aircraft—a 4 turboprop plane that has a smooth, uneventful flight of about 45 minutes in the sunny skies of the Caribbean. The other passengers are presumably all Cuban, laden with various provisions for their consumer-goods bereft brethren in the home country.

The expat Cubans, who are domiciled mostly in Fla., send \$100s millions every year to their relations left behind (in more ways than one) in Cuba. They are now allowed to visit once every two years, so they make the most of that opportunity.

Having come from a very similar background, growing up with an expat family in NYC with friends and relations back in Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), I know the evils of communism first hand and the emotions roiled by a stolen country. I also went back to CZ as a 13-year old in 1967 (the topic of another lengthy travelogue), so I have a really good frame of reference of the “glories” of scientific socialism for this journey.

At the same time, I can't help but think that if we engaged culturally, politically, and above all economically with Cuba when Soviet communism collapsed around 1989, that the island would be free and prosperous today. It seems that we can only practice "constructive engagement" with fascist nations, such as South Africa in pre-Mandela years, but not communist regimes. Cuba is the mouse that roared, a small and impoverished island nation that projects a much greater political persona and effect in places like Angola, Venezuela and Nicaragua, than it actually possesses. But it is greatly enhanced by our small-minded, counterproductive, and ossified policy towards a little country famously only 90 miles from our border and maintaining an oversized thorn in the ass of our reality. Surely, we are hyperventilating in our slow-motion pathology. If ever the old adage, "cut your nose off to spite your face", is apropos, this is it.

In any case, I get off the turboprop at the small Havana airport and get my bag and go into the makeshift customs area in a corrugated tin structure. It consists of a set of tables, each occupied by a humorless apparatchik (is there any other kind?). I am quizzed about my background and my intentions there, and after about 10 minutes of this I am waved through. They do not stamp my passport, however, because, wink wink, as an Americano I was never there. This is just as well given all my international travels, since such a stamp would cause endless problems at our own border with the apparatchiks at U.S. airport customs:

"So Mr. Uhlir, I see that you have been to Cuba before. And what were you doing there? Please go with agent so-and-so since we want to ask you a few more questions...". *Ad infinitum*, unless, perhaps, I somehow lost my passport.

I emerge in the early afternoon sun on the other side. The taxis waiting there are the famous Cuban cliché of 1950s sedans. I get in one and practice my Spanish while going the fairly short distance to my hotel. It is billed as a 4-star place, but it's to local, not international, standards. It is built on Havana's "Embassy Row", in the suburbs safely removed from the center of town and the general population. The room is OK, but there are no amenities. And I will talk about the bad food a bit later.

I soon meet my host, Alejandro, with whom I have worked at other IAP meetings I co-organized in Sao Paulo, Pretoria, and Shanghai, and with whom I will meet yet again in Jamaica. Alejandro is the IT guy for the ACC and a friendly fellow. He tells me that he has relatives in the U.S. and Sweden, but he seems to be staying put. I have a short planning meeting that afternoon since it is a way to arrive a day early, two days before the start of the main event. The U.S. authorities authorize travel only for the days you are at the meetings, plus 1-day in advance. God forbid that you go there for pleasure, assuming there is any.

I already have exchanged my compulsory \$75 per day for my 5-day stay and gotten the local currency at the official paltry exchange rate. It is a communist hangover, like many other relics that I was already familiar with from my travels in the CZ socialist paradise, some 40-years earlier. The black market for local currency and for dollars is much more favorable, although, as I suspect and quickly confirm, there is little to buy anyway (at least officially). The last thing I want to do, however, is to give the Cuban authorities an opportunity to make an example out of me.

I decide to go for a walk near the hotel in the early evening, prior to going downtown for some music. The weather is like at other Caribbean isles—tropical, with little change in seasons—except for the hurricanes. Slightly humid, but pleasant. The street where the hotel is located is a large boulevard. It has a grassy median strip with occasional palm trees dividing the two-way road. There is little traffic. Villas or embassies line the avenue. A few blocks from the hotel I encounter a tarantula on the sidewalk. I decide to go back.

I have already bought several Cohiba cigars at the hotel. They are expensive but fresh, almost equal to the prices they charge for them in Europe or China. Cohibas can go for much less on the street or “unofficial” kiosks, but they can also be knock-offs, with just the “Cohiba” TM paper band slipped onto the cigar. In any event, I have a photo of me smoking one of those cigars taken by a Chinese colleague of mine. I also am drinking a Cuba Libre—the “libre” meaning something altogether different there, I know.

I take an aging taxi downtown. One thing I notice all over is the pervasive propaganda on the street. There are billboards on the side of the road with revolutionary slogans and pictures of the Castros and other revolutionaries from their history—all male. I do not hear any radio programs or see the TV—there are none in my hotel room—but I imagine it must be there too.

We soon come to a fairly upscale section of the residential suburb, no doubt occupied by the privileged leaders of the masses. This soon gives way to the banks of the ocean and a large thoroughfare that hugs the contours of the sea and then the river that feeds into it. In no time, I am at the foot of old Havana and I ask the driver to let me off at random.

I walk around the area, which is charmingly dilapidated. Not wanting to spend a lot of time moseying around, I go to a near-by establishment that is emanating some very promising sounds. It turns out to be the Havana Social Club with the venerated band. An award-winning documentary of the group was made just a few years earlier and the U.S. government, in all its wisdom, refused to grant visas to its members for the ceremonial hoopla. Bang zoom.

So, I happily go inside. At the door, there is a cover charge of \$35 for part of a set, which seems rather pricey, given the overall situation, so I go to the adjoining bar. This is almost empty, but one can hear (but not see) the same music that is playing in the next room with the door open. I order a few shots of añejo 7-year-old Havana Club rum, light up a Cohiba, and enjoy the sounds.

* * *

The next day is free, so I decide to tour old Havana in earnest. I have the first of several really lousy breakfasts at the hotel. There is nothing fresh, despite the bounty of fruit and vegetables that must grow all over. They only serve locally canned and processed foods that are mediocre at best. It really pisses me off. The coffee, which should be excellent, is weak but OK, so I have that and not much else. As Bugs Bunny would say, “what maroons”.

I take another cab downtown with Liu Chuang, my friend from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. We walk around, first through an outdoor art market that has some interesting pieces. We spend close to an hour there and I buy a few trinkets, not wanting to carry

large *objets d'art* around town all day. We then walk around the old town, seeing several colonial buildings and a large church, which has a nice view of the quarter from the bell tower. On the street below is a famous bodega, of which I bought a brightly painted paper mâché scene that I have subsequently hung on the wall in my bathroom, along with other scenes from the global South—the Guguletu slum in Cape Town, South Africa; a small oil painting of Salvador, Brazil; and a wood-cut scene of the famous cable car in Valparaiso, Chile.

We eat a decent lunch in a hotel and then continue our wandering around the old town, which is mostly in various stages of advanced entropy. If the U.S. had normalized relations a few decades ago, old Havana—a UNESCO World Heritage site—would be a bustling, refurbished jewel. I hope it doesn't fall down before the Castros do.

In mid-afternoon we are thirsty and looking for some bottled water. It is then that I realize that in walking around half a day that I have not seen even one convenience or food store! We ask on the street and are told to go another seven blocks to a *tienda gobermental*. We arrive at a small store that is poorly stocked and with surly staff, but water is to be had.

A few blocks later are the main buildings of the federal government. They are not very imposing structures for such pervasive power, but I betcha they have good supplies inside for the muckety mucks. It is the ultimate nanny socialism, with everything state owned. There is hardly any salary pay, but coupons for everything, state owned education, health care, living space, and media. A workers' "paradise" with nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing to strive for. It is no wonder, then, that the real activity is on the shadow market, the illegal black market where goods and services can be had and money can be made. Busquamos Fidel, but not very hard, lest we actually find him.

Liu Chuang goes back to the hotel and I meet up with Mike Clegg, the Foreign Secretary of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. He is also a co-chair of the IAP and a frequent co-conspirator of mine on the digital knowledge program that I run. Unlike me, he has met Fidel and Raul Castro, although what that has gotten him remains a mystery.

Mike is the most jovial and outwardly friendly person I have ever met. He is always laughing and his good mood is infectious. He is a famous professor of genetics at UC Irvine, although he is never there and travels more all over the world than anyone else I know (including me). He is also a pilot and the owner of several airplanes, so he must be independently wealthy. He has built an escape villa south of Mexico City, where I presume he spends some time with his Mexican wife. It is a pleasure to know the man.

Mike and I walk around a bit to locate a promising restaurant. We find a decent-looking seafood place that is about as good as it gets, so we order some lobster tails and hope for the best. The good news is that the food is edible, if not very well prepared. I presume that we are being followed and watched, like in all police states, but I have no proof of it. Either the snoops are very good or the paranoia has gotten the better of me.

After dinner, we meet some other people from the international meeting and go to a recommended jazz club. Wow. There is an electric jazz fusion band of five young people playing

original music. It's one of the best if not the best jazz experience I've had, and that's saying something. They are spectacular. But what is most noticeable is that these people, though outstanding, are but one of many, many Cubans playing music everywhere. It is a creative outlet in an otherwise repressed society. The music is largely "apolitical" and cannot be controlled.

* * *

The work begins the next day and it is a very successful meeting. The Cubans in the elite institution are well educated and informed. They are also quite well traveled, being invited all over. They are hard working, competent, and friendly. In short, they are the kind of international collaborators that one would want to have as work partners.

We have a series of presentations and discussions. The results are available on the IAP website.

On the evening of the first day of the meeting, a group of five of us decides to go looking for a place to eat in the newer part of the city. We walk around a bit until we are approached by a stranger on the sidewalk, who invites us to a private restaurant, which is actually in someone's home. They have a name for such establishments, although the word escapes me.

This whole encounter is very strange, but we decide to risk it since there is some safety in numbers, the official restaurants are few and mediocre, and it's an adventure. We get to the house, which is nearby and operated like some speak easy, and sit at one of the few tables in the front room. The food is edible but eminently forgettable and we also have some warm beers. The conversation is more interesting than the food. The owners tell us that their establishment is grudgingly allowed, but they have to pay a certain fee every month. They say they make very little money. I assume that it's another way of saying that it is not allowed, but they pay off those who would otherwise close them up. It is a sad state of affairs.

The next morning we continue the discussions at the meeting, but in the afternoon we go for a visit to a biotechnology institute. I am not a biologist so I cannot evaluate their work, but it sounds interesting. I can't help but wonder whether they are also engaged in some biological weapons research. A larger concrete building that apparently houses many experimental animals adjoins the facility. It makes me shudder.

That evening we are all invited to a "banquet" on the veranda of a nice old hotel. I recall we have some small cold shrimp appetizer with Russian dressing ;-(. The rest of the meal is not very good either and I don't remember it anyway. Some mariachi-like *a capella* musicians serenade us and the company is excellent.

A young woman in a seemingly depressed state hangs out on the street adjoining the veranda, however, no doubt looking for a handout. There is something very annoying about her, perhaps because she is projecting guilt upon us when we desperately want to have a good time. We ignore her assiduously.

She does not have the demeanor of a prostitute and has no young children as props, like so many female beggars in developing countries do. A few years earlier I read that Cuba has a bustling

sex tourism trade and I even see a very attractive younger woman with an aging gringo on the street the second day of my stay there, but such peccadillos are not for U.S. citizens. She wanders off at last and I am left wondering what her story is.

* * *

The fifth day is our day of departure and we conclude the meeting in the late morning. Everyone is happy and so am I, having had an interesting experience that few Americanos do—at least so far.

I retrace my itinerary that afternoon and go through customs in Miami with some trepidation. The lack of a stamp in my passport is a dead give-away, so there is no point in prevaricating. I am fully prepared to get the third degree when I have to ‘fess up to where I’ve been, but the customs agent is non-chalant and waives me through. He is used to it, I’m sure. I get home that evening without incident, but laden with some rich memories of an unfortunate land.

EGYPT

Notes from Alexandria
6-8 September 2006
by
P.F. Uhler

I am on my first trip to Egypt to give an invited talk at an “Access to Knowledge” (A2K) workshop at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Alexandria Library). My Frankfurt connection is delayed over two hours, but I meet up with another co-conspirator, Jamie Love, who is responsible for co-organizing the meeting. Jamie is the director of a Ralph Nader-affiliated NGO called the Consumer Project for Technology (CP Tech), which was recently renamed Knowledge Ecology International (KEI). KEI at the same time got a \$500K MacArthur Foundation award, which in my view he fully deserves. Jamie is an economist who looks out for the public interest in organizations such as the WTO, WIPO, and WHO. Without people and organizations like his, the world would be even more skewed in favor of multinational corporate interests than it already is.

We get through customs in Cairo without any major hassles and are met by our driver, Ehab. Ehab has a nice Toyota and stylish shades and a big black mustache. He takes us for a ride. We go through the outskirts of Cairo on our way down to Alexandria, called Alex by the locals. It is about a three-and-a-half-hour drive. We spot the Giza pyramids not far from the highway, so we ask Ehab to swing by them. It is very crowded, but he dodges and weaves through the traffic in about half the time it would take an ordinary mortal. He swings by the pyramids and gets back on the highway without incident, although it is a game of inches.

As we continue down the big highway to Alexandria, Ehab drives like a maniac, driving between cars in lanes, passing trucks on the right shoulder, exceeding the speed limit by a whole lot, and tail-gating cars in front of him that are going slow, beeping and flicking his lights no matter what the reason for the delay may be. He is fond of pointing out other “crazy” drivers. Jamie has a sprained back and has taken muscle relaxants so he is trying to sleep through all this, while I am trying my best to keep my cool and my mouth shut.

We manage to arrive in Alexandria in one piece, despite the fact that Ehab has no idea where we are going there. I give him a very good tip nonetheless since he went out of his way to go by the pyramids and literally spent the entire day waiting for us to arrive and then driving us to Alex. I am relieved to be at the hotel in one piece, nonetheless.

The hotel itself, the Windsor Palace, was built by the Brits in 1906. It is right on the bay of the Alexandria harbor, which is a magnificent crescent with the hotel situated right in the middle. The Windsor is one of those turn-of-the century colonial extravaganzas that has seen better days, but that retains its bourgeois grandeur and ostentatiousness despite its fading glory. It is replete with gilded Corinthian columns in the ground floor areas, French-style trim, and classical artwork. My room is literally taller than it is wide, with a ceiling height of about 20 feet.

Because we are almost 4 hours late in arriving, we unfortunately miss the classical concert for the Library workshop participants, as well as the dinner at the Syrian Club. Instead, we head out

to see what food we might find. We go down a few local side streets to look around. We see mostly open air restaurants that all serve various innards—hearts, livers, brains—presumably beef. After a few of these, we decide on one that serves little sausages and skewers of mystery meat, but by the looks of it not made of innards, at least not mostly. We sit at the only little table this food stand has on the street. Each of us gets a skewer on a bun. The entire meal costs a total of about \$0.30, which is about all that it is worth. We eat it without any of the raw veggies it comes with, although we do eat some pickled ones of unknown provenance. We also leave alone the water, which appears to be tap water served in a refilled plastic bottle, with one grimy silver cup for the two of us.

While waiting for this treat, we watch about ten moslem men praying on the opposite side of the street. I refer to it as “going to the mat for Allah.” This happens in all Islamic countries multiple times per day even in the more secular ones that I have been to, such as Tunisia and Senegal. It is a socially binding ritual, accompanied by recorded chants on loudspeakers out on the streets. Frankly, these chants give me the willies and provide a haunting overlay of sound.

We go down the block about a hundred meters and stop at a hole-in-the-wall pizza place. We get some custom-made, personal-pan pizzas that are not very good, but a whole lot more comforting than the mystery meat place. Each one costs less than \$2. We take them back to the sidewalk café at our hotel and eat them al fresco with some Egyptian red wine. Not too bad, but we regret missing out on the Syrian Club.

The weather is still hot and the streets are very crowded. The most common side scenes are hookah smokers at open-air cafes, drinking coffees, some playing backgammon. There are lots of families with kids out, even though it is after 10:00. The women all wear shawls and a few wear burkas, yet several shops have Frederick’s of Hollywood-type of lingerie displayed.

I go to my room and turn on the tube. It has about a dozen channels, of which only three appear to be local and the rest are British and American. Reruns of the U.S. sitcom, 3rd Rock from the Sun, seem to be very popular. There is a MTV-like Arabic Music channel that has rather suggestive videos of beautiful Arabic women in strange domestic scenes. It all sounds like traditional belly-dancing music to me, but what do I know. Between the street scenes and the TV I see a very confused and conflicted society, caught between traditionalism and modernity. The backlash of the traditionalists to Western decadence in many Islamic countries, including Egypt, is promoting the anti-Western asceticism that is fueling the current “clash of civilizations,” as Samuel Huntington would put it.

However, my experience in Alex is decidedly with the modern, more secular crowd. They are among the leading Arab intellectuals who are focused on information policy, A2K, and intellectual property law. At the Alexandria Library the next day I meet many Arabs from the region. The young staff there is very professional, competent, and decidedly non-traditional. I make a point of introducing myself to all of them and joining them for coffee and lunch, instead of hanging out with my western cohorts. They are very well informed, worldly, and personable. Many have studied in the U.S. or even taught there. They are not anti-American, just anti-Bush. We have a lot in common.

The meeting itself is very high-level and the presentations and discussion are stimulating. I give my talk toward the end of the first day on “Creating More Efficient Models for Networked Scientific Data.” I open my presentation by saying that I am pleased and honored to be speaking at one of civilization’s original cradles of knowledge. This goes over very well. I am preaching to the choir, but the choir is small. Unfortunately, most of the Islamic world does not get it, but we must do what we can. My interactions at this meeting, limited though they are, are certainly encouraging.

That evening I go for a long walk in the immediate neighborhood, which appears to be the central business and tourist district, bordering on the waterfront. I come across a ymca.com internet café and go in to clear my e-mails. This is not easy. First, I am told that it costs 150 for an hour online (there are about 5.40 Egyptian pounds to US\$1. Moreover, even though the keyboard has both Arabic and Roman alphabets, most of the e-mail icons are in Arabic and the typing goes from right to left—not easy! After about 45 minutes I give up, hoping to save ¼ of the rather exorbitant cost of about \$28/hour that was quoted to me at the outset. I am informed, however, that the cost is the same for up to one hour, so I go back to use up my last 15 minutes. When I go to the cashier I take out 150 pounds and he tells me that it’s 1.50, or roughly \$0.28! I thank him for being honest. On my way back I stop to buy some Brazilian coffee for a gift to the host of my next meetings in Moscow.

On the last day in Alex I get a tour of the library after lunch. It is very impressive. It is important to have such a hub of digital information and promotion of knowledge in Egypt and the Islamic world, but it is not enough. I commend them for their efforts. I really do hope to have the opportunity to return again soon.

After the meeting I go for a quick tour of the harbor with a couple of friends and then get dinner at the hotel. It turns out to be the only decent meal in Alex (all the others were at the Library and rather mediocre). I order a tomato and mozzarella salad, which comes out grilled, and prawns, which are fresh and are served whole. I have some very good Lebanese Syrah wine, “Sarya”, which is reminiscent of a Zinfandel.

As I am finishing my meal, in comes Ehab, asking me if I remember him. How could I forget! He is my driver for the return to Cairo airport. I have a 2:30 a.m. flight on Aeroflop to Moscow. I type this travelogue en route, instead of watching him weave through the traffic. On the way back we see a lot of police action on the highway, which on closer inspection turns out to be a dead pedestrian, no doubt killed while trying to cross the road by a maniacal driver. Like I said, a clash of civilizations...

FRANCE

[to be completed]

MADAGASCAR

Notes from Madagascar

August – September 2017

I am flying to Johannesburg for the tenth time, but instead of staying in South Africa I am going on to Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. The main reason for the trip is a set of meetings, 4-8 September, organized mainly by the CODATA African Open Data Platform at the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the CODATA Task Group on Preservation and Access to Scientific and Technical Data for Development (PASTD), and the local Malagasy government officials. I was not going to come, but the PASTD Chair, Liu Chuang, paid for my travel, so I am on my way. I have collaborated with Liu Chuang for two decades and am still working on projects with her (see my China tavelogues).

Naturally, since I'm going to Madagascar for the first and perhaps only time, I am spending an extra five days to do some sightseeing on the island. It is the fourth largest island in the world (after Borneo, Greenland, and Papua-New Guinea) and is also extremely biodiverse, with about 80% of the species there found nowhere else. I will take a private tour of some state parks to the west and east of the capital, spending about two days on each side.

The flight is almost 15 hours from JFK to JNB and then another 3.5 hours to Antananarivo (what the Malagasy locals call Tana). I leave JFK on the morning of 30 August and arrive in Madagascar on the early afternoon of the 31st. The flights are uneventful and I have upgraded to an exit row both coming and going on my carrier, South African Airways.

The airport in Tana is small and not well organized. We are handed customs cards, but there are no counters or pens and of course I don't have a pen. I have to wait to get one from another passenger and find out that I have to have a Visa. Although they have a Visa desk and it's only \$32, it causes some commotion. I have to go to four places, including an ATM, and some bribe money for a porter (expediter/translator/personal go-between), who demands a \$20 payoff, which I gladly give him. Fortunately, I have an official letter of invitation from the Ministry of Environment, which helps grease the skids.

After about a half hour of this rigamarole, I am all processed and the last man standing. I find my driver, Tojonirina, and head to town in a nice, big Hundai SUV. I will have the driver and car for a personal tour over the next 5 days. Tojonirina is a very affable fellow, who speaks very good English, but also French and of course Malagasy. We speak mostly in French and he explains a lot of things in the 45-minute drive to the hotel.

The Hotel Colbert Spa and Casino is very nice. I am spending just my first night there, with the next four at hotels in state parks, but I return the Colbert on Monday for another four. Although the menus at the hotel restaurant look good, there is no one there, so I decide to brave the great outdoors. I walk around in the dark, completely uninformed, which is probably not very wise, but in a few minutes I stumble upon Le Carnivore and decide to go in. I have been to another Carnivore restaurant in Kampala in 2000, which was not nearly as upscale as this one and was populated mostly by ladies of the night. It is a Brazilian-style churrascaria, but an African chain,

and it is just what the doctor ordered. I head back to the hotel right after dinner and crash until the early morning, when I am ready to head out for my excellent Madagascar adventure.

* * *

I get up early on the 31st and we leave for the tour at 8:00. We drive outside Tana for about 45-minutes to the “royal palace” of Madagascar kings and queens from the late 18th century to the late 19th, when the French colonized it and put an end to the rubbish. The compound consists mostly of an original black palace, which is a bare-bones, oversized shack, and a somewhat nicer two-story and multiple-dwelling complex built by the later monarchs. Versailles it ain't.

There are some other primitive stone structures around. One is a big stone throne with a platform for sacrificing big animals. Another area was used for sacrificing small animals. There are three canons at the wall, all pointing in the same direction. There is a small guard tower from which there is a good view, since the compound is on top of a hill. There also are two stone pools, which were apparently filled by seven virgins (seven being a lucky number and the virgins being expendable). There are some stone steps and rice storage bins and an outside cooking area for one of the queens. That's about it.

What makes the biggest impression, however, is the monarchs' pettiness, cruelty, and superstitious ignorance as recounted by my guide. The first king would climb up the rungs in the wall in his basic abode when guests arrived, only to descend when he was assured that all was well. The queen that succeeded him was in power for only a few years before she was killed by another woman who assumed the throne and ruled mercilessly for the next 32 years. She expelled all the Western Christian missionaries and then killed all the native Christians she could, often torturing them, burning them alive, etc. She had eight mirrors at her long dinner table to keep watch on her guests, lest she be poisoned.

The French invaded and took over as colonists in 1893. They abolished the monarchy and kept the office of prime minister which had already been established. An artificial lake with a monument in the middle, one of the few interesting sights in Tana, at least when the locals are not pissing on the banks, commemorates the soldiers who died on France's behalf in WWI. The French ruled Madagascar as a colony until 1960, when the country gained independence.

We drive back to town and are supposed to visit another royal palace in Tana (there were 12 hills and 12 kingdoms in old Madagascar, which were unified by the first king), and then have lunch before heading for the state park. Unfortunately, we hit a big traffic jam and plans change because of the delays, so we skip the other palace and the lunch in town and go directly out of Tana to the east at about 11:30.

This turns out to be an interesting drive, which takes about 6 hours, including almost 2 hours for a lunch stop and a very interesting visit to a lizard zoo. We go by many women washing clothes in a dirty stream and laying them out on rocks to dry. The countryside is scenic, although most of the original hardwood trees have been cut down and replaced by soft, fast-growing, eucalyptus trees, imported from Oz. The road gets worse and the living conditions get poorer and poorer.

The lizard farm, where I spend about 45 minutes, is very enjoyable. There are separate shacks with vegetation for the animals, which do not seem to be mistreated. The largest is for chameleons and geckos, all of which are very colorful and docile. I even take one in my hand and take a lot of pictures. We then go to a bat shack, some snake and turtle cages, a crocodile enclosure, and a small sanctuary for exotic birds.

We arrive at the hotel at dusk (about 5:30) and it is quite modern, spacious, and even has internet and some satellite TV channels (5). The restaurant is not bad, which is a good thing, since there is no other place to eat for quite a ways. There is also a pretty good bar, which I do not go to (mirabile dictu), but which has some pretty good imported wine.

There is bed netting in my room, but I don't use it, since I haven't seen any anopheles mosquitoes (those that carry malaria and other diseases). It is the middle of the dry season and quite cool, being the end of winter there.

* * *

The next day is my lemur day in the rainforest. I go on three different excursions, all well guided by local expert guides.

The first is to the state park, called Andsibe state park. My local guide there is Jerry, part of a much longer and more difficult to pronounce name, I'm sure. Jerry is a good-natured man, quite tall and plump, who knows a lot about the local flora and fauna, but especially lemurs. He points out medicinal plants along the way, as well as birds, insects, and other animals that we come across.

There are four types of lemurs, different in color, size, and behavior, and we spot all of them. The park has a network of pretty good trails, some of which are paved with stone, but occasionally we go off the beaten path at places that Jerry knows or other guides have spotted (there are other tourists there). Some of the underbrush is very dense and the hills steep, so the going can be quite slow and somewhat dangerous, but my guide is very conscientious about warning me of this or that branch, roots, or other dangerous trap to look out for. He also knows several lemur calls, which he uses periodically, and which add to the authenticity of the experience.

We conclude the visit with a long walk by a stream and a lake. The water is muddy, but green. Little wooden bridges dot the landscape. I have taken a lot of pictures and am ready to go. After three hours, I am quite tired and believe I have seen a lot.

The second place is perhaps 10 km away by a very bad, dirt road. It is a French resort, out in the middle of nowhere. The family used to mine and export graphite, the factory is still here, but has been repurposed, and the proceeds were partially used to build a quite fancy resort.

We get to the place, which has a lodge on a pond, with many flowers and upscale bungalows in the landscape. There is a pool and other amenities, including of course a French restaurant in the lodge.

I have what is the best and most memorable meal of my 10-day trip to Madagascar. Both the starter and the main is zebu, the local oxen, which are everywhere. The food is well presented and tasty. I begin with a carpaccio, with some trepidation of food poisoning or parasites, but appear to have dodged that bullet at the time of this writing, over a week later. This is followed by a

tournedos, which is a large cut, and I can only eat about half of it. I conclude the meal with a “café gourmand”, which is an espresso and some small deserts. I wash it down with mineral water (which I drink everywhere, even en route) and a pichet of rose wine. I wanted red wine, but they didn’t have any (sacré bleu), so I had to settle for the pink stuff, although it was quite good.

After lunch, we went to Lemur Island, a sanctuary for such animals that were previously kept as pets. Once on the island, they are captive because they are afraid of water. They don’t even drink from a stream, preferring the liquids in deciduous plants. However, being raised as pets and in captivity, they are used to humans and jump on visitors who come to their habitat. At one point, I had two lemurs on my shoulders, although one jumped off before a picture could be taken. But I have many to show that there was one who hung out on my head.

After the Lemur Island excursion, we took a small wooden canoe on the small stream surrounding the island and docked across the way at another island which had a sign saying “Access Interdit”. I immediately thought of the island of Dr. Moreau, but bit my lip. The guide almost certainly wouldn’t get the reference. In any case, it was a place where there were some other, larger lemurs in the wild. We managed to attract one and I took some pictures of that as well.

We left les iles de lemurs around 14:00 and I was exhausted from the adventures and the big lunch. We headed back to the hotel, where I slept and watched soccer for three hours. After the rest, I went on a night walk on the road outside the national park. My guide was again Jery. We walked for about an hour and saw a tree frog, a gecko, some green walking sticks, and a big spider, all by the side of the road. But despite Jery’s lemur’s calls, none showed up. Tant pis. I tipped him handsomely for both excursions anyway, and we both were glad to have gone.

* * *

The next morning, we set out early to return to Tana and then go to the other side of the island, west. A little digression about the state of driving in Tana and Madagascar is in order.

It is hard to describe the state of the roads. I have only been to one country, Bhutan, where the roads were worse. The pavement can be good for several km and then all of a sudden you enter a zone that has craters big enough to break any axle. This then requires driving on the other side of the road or very slowly weaving between the pits so that the car remains intact. Mind you, this is on the main roads of the country, the N1 on the east and, to a much lesser extent, the N2 on the west. The dirt roads off these “highways” are uniformly bad.

Tojoirina is highly expert at this and constant vigilance is essential, since these traps occur suddenly and at frequent intervals. He only errs once on the entire trip and it is not one of the deeper holes, so the tire and axel remain whole, even if we are shaken (though not stirred).

I ask him why the roads are not maintained. He said that the much worse N1 was used by truckers to bring goods from the largest port in Madagascar to the capital. There is much greater and heavier use of that road. It is also wetter and more mountainous than the western side of the country, which is yet more reason for the dilapidation. He says that the roads are repaired only in advance of national elections.

However, in addition to the physical disintegration of the roads is the traffic, which can be very bad, mostly caused by big trucks on hills. These trucks spew glorious amounts of black diesel smoke, which cause you to gag even with the windows shut. If it's only one truck or a small number of vehicles, you can take a chance to pass them, but the windy roads and the possibility of huge potholes make that a very risky proposition. Tojoirina is not particularly rash, but all these conditions keep you in a pretty much constant nervous state of anxiety.

We arrive in Antananarivo in the late morning and after negotiating some traffic jams, we end up at the Queen's Palace. This compound is on a hill overlooking much of the city and is the most famous attraction, which is not saying a great deal. My driver drops me off and I go on a personal tour of the premises for about 45 minutes with another local guide.

Unfortunately, the Palace was burned out in 1995 in some political uprising, so there is only the structure and you cannot go inside. The remnants of the interior were subsequently moved to some museum, but the main relic—the queen's crown—was stolen a few years ago. I suspect it will be found, since I cannot be sold, but no doubt it will take some time.

The tour is not very interesting, but the guide does recount one shocking anecdote. The Malagasy circumcise the little boys, but the custom involves the grandfather (or father, if the grandfather is unavailable) eating the foreskin, usually with a banana (no pun intended). I am skeptical, but the story was corroborated by a short article in the airline magazine on my way back, so I assume it is true.

After a good lunch al fresco near the Palace, and minus any foreskins, we drive uneventfully out of the city to the western part of the country. The road is much better here and we arrive at our destination while it is still daylight, about 120 km out of town.

The location and setting are quite beautiful, especially the grounds of the hotel. The hotel, named Kavitaha, itself is adequate. The tour itinerary describes it as a 3-star place, but I would peg it as a 2-star motel anywhere else.

I take a walk down the main road through the center of town, called Ampefy. It is dusty and very poor and the nightfall is giving me the willies as I make my way back to the hotel. I go back for the pre-paid, non-descript dinner. I decide to go to someplace in town for dinner the next night. I saw some French place when I was out.

The next day, we get an early start after a small breakfast al fresco by the lake. The scenery makes it worthwhile. We hike to the crater of Andranotoraha. More dust, heat, scrawny cattle. We get to the lip of the crater, which holds some agricultural plots on one side and a field of quicksand on the other. It is a common place, while at the same time unique and strange.

We go back down the hill and continue to Itasy lake, the big attraction here. We walk through the reeds and get to a row of primitive, wooden dugout canoes, they call pirogues. We paddle across the lake in the increasingly hot sun to an island named "Îlot de la Vierge". It's got a small hill, with a little monastery and chapel on top and a religious monument from where there was a nice view of the whole lake and environs. It is a place for tourists to take snapshots.

After we get back, we drive to town and go to the French inn for a lunch on the veranda outdoors. Much better. We spend the afternoon going to a very scenic place with geysers, pools, and a river with a waterfall. The road, however, was a disaster and 5 km/hour was pushing it. It takes about 1.5 hours to drive each way, although the distance is barely 10 miles.

We return to the hotel around dusk and I decide to go back to the French inn for some drinks and a better dinner. I sit in the screened-in veranda, relaxing, sipping on a gin and tonic. The place is empty, except for a local mother who is breastfeeding one of her two kids and what I suppose is the child of the French proprietor and his native wife. I peg the girl to be around 8 or 9-years old.

There are wooden benches on each side of a table, that seats about 3 people. There are 4 such tables in total. The little girl lies down on her back on the bench closest to me and proceeds to give a series of the most graphically lewd demonstration of sex acts. She puts her head over the edge of the bench, facing me, and opens her mouth in the form of an O. She then alternates between pointing with the fingers on both her hands at her open mouth and reaching with both her hands as if to grab buttocks and bring an erection into her mouth.

During this time, the breastfeeding woman looks on and laughs. After about five minutes of this, which seems like hours, she gets up and joins her older sister for dinner in an adjoining room.

Needless to say, there are a lot of disturbing questions that this episode raises. The fact that the little girl knew very well what she was doing means that she was practiced at it. Did she actually do those things? For how long and how often?

Did her parents know what she was doing? It was totally uninhibited and in the open, so that would seem pretty obvious. If that's true, did her father engage in those acts? Was he her "instructor"? Was it with the consent or approval of her mother?

Did the police authorities know? I didn't see any gendarmes. Was it even against the law there? Even if it were, it would be difficult for the local police to arrest one of their main businessmen. Power politics, in more ways than one.

Was such behavior sanctioned by the society? The lactating laughing cow in the corner would seem to indicate that such acts are common, or at least accepted. What was her relationship to the girl and the family?

The whole hideous incident raises many questions and no answers.

* * *

The next morning we return to Tana and in the afternoon I start four days of official meetings, trying to convince the local authorities of the value of openness to scientific data and literature.

MONGOLIA

Notes from Ulaan Baatar
September 2009
by
P.F. Uhlir

I am on my way to Ulaan Baatar, capital of (Outer) Mongolia. It is a place I've always wanted to go to for as long as I can remember. Don't ask me why. Perhaps it's the extreme remoteness from the day-to-day, like Timbuktu or Kathmandu, which are still on my list. Or it's to satisfy my fetish for the exotic. I rather suspect it will be disappointingly conventional—westernized, homogenized, and pasteurized if not sterilized.

Having been to Inner Mongolia, a protectorate of China, some decade ago, it will probably be similar. Nonetheless, I will get my fix for the unusual. It is the 5th new country I will have visited in the past year, having been to Cuba, Uruguay, Tahiti, and Taiwan—all of which merit some write-up themselves.

I just spent 3 days in Beijing on my 10th trip there—old hat, as they say. Unlike the usual toxic fog that envelops the city and makes the act of breathing a conscious chore, the air this time is quite clear—like the City of Lost Angels on an average day. In fact, it is just as clean as when I was there in March. I ask people who live there whether this is a trend or my timing is just fortunate, but they give me mixed responses. Nonetheless, it does seem to be cleaner after the Olympics and I am happy to think so until proven otherwise (since then proven otherwise).

I was in Beijing this time to give a couple of presentations and chair a session at the 6th International Society for Digital Earth Conference. This was a typical Chinese conference featuring a few American and European luminaries and hordes of Chinese. It also was typically well organized, hosted by my long-term friend, Guo Huadong, at the fancy Beijing International Conference Center (BICC) right by the Olympic Park (the bird's nest stadium is across from the back entrance).

The conference also had two really outstanding presentations. One was by Michael Jones, the CTO of Google Earth. Jones is a consummate geek. His short bio boasts that he was writing code and inventing apps in the 4th grade. He spoke about iconic figures, like Buckminster Fuller and Al Gore, who were prescient about the reality that Google Earth embodies. But the real whiz-bang part was what Google Earth does and how it does it. Since you can look much of it up on their portal, I won't advertise. Very impressive though.

The other memorable presentation was of Earth and space in 3D, being manipulated remotely in real time from NYC by a NOAA scientist, and linked by Skype and the net. The rotating globe had a series of visualized data sets superimposed on it, showing different physical parameters about our planet's vital signs, such as a vegetation index, cloud cover, sea-surface temperature, graphic predictions of sea level rise, and several others. All done flawlessly from half way around the world with expert commentary. Well worth the price of admission.

Aside from meeting some old cronies and a few new ones at the conference, I also took the opportunity to visit with some Chinese and American colleagues. I am planning a bilateral study on improving scientific data sharing, which I needed to discuss more fully with my Chinese counterparts, so I had a working dinner with some of them the evening I arrived. The next day I spent a leisurely morning and early lunch with the staff of the National Science Foundation at the U.S. embassy (luckily not located at the hyper-security compound itself, but at a nearby modern high rise).

I ate quite well, as usual, having dinner twice at the local top-notch Peking duck outlet, once with my study counterparts and the other with part of the group I would be going with to Mongolia early the next morning. The other dinner was at the gala outdoor banquet the opening night of the ISDE Conference. The food there was quite good and there was some live entertainment. The lunch with the embassy staff at a gyoza (steamed dumpling) restaurant was authentic, cheap, and good. The dumplings were filled with ground lamb and lots of Chinese parsley (cilantro). An appetizer of some roasted peanuts and a shredded salad that posed some moderate risk because it was uncooked, rounded it out.

I stopped in as well at the 5-star Crown Plaza Hotel next to the BICC. The hotel is one of my favorite haunts in Beijing, where I have eaten previously on two occasions at their excellent Brazilian churrascaria. This time, I just had a glass of Argentinian malbec at the opulent lobby bar and sampled some of their sublime Chinese-Italian fusion bread sticks. I read the China Daily while sitting there, which had an article about the recent declaration by the president of the Davos Global Economic Forum that China would lead the rest of the world out of the global recession. A bit of window-dressing on the rising Chinese economic hegemony.

But all this was a mere prelude, a stop-over before the main act of this trip, the upcoming 5 days in Mongolia. My excuse for this all-expense paid excursion was to speak at and participate in an international training workshop in Ulaan Baatar on Inter-Agency Collaborative Technologies in Earth Observations for Global Change Research in the Asia-Pacific Region. It is funded by the Asia-Pacific Network (APN), which is largely supported by the U.S. National Research Foundation.

Going with me are LI GuoQing, LIU DingSheng, and XIE JiBo, all from the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) Center for Earth Observations and Digital Earth that GUO Huadong directs; LIU Chuang of the CAS Institute for Geography and Natural Resources Research; Mohamed Nordin HASSAN, the director of the International Council for Science (ICSU) Asia Regional Office in Malaysia; Luigi FUSCO of the European Space Agency in Italy and his wife Maria Teresa, a professor at a university in Rome; CHANIN Mangkhang of the Data Democracy Program in Thailand; Tomoko DOKO, a Ph.D. student at Keio University in Japan; and Linda STEVENSON, a program officer for the APN, who lives in Kyoto, Japan, but is from Scotland.

We go at 5 a.m. on September 11 to the Beijing Airport. After a hassle-free check-in we all head for the Starbucks for coffee and breakfast, and then to the plane. Unfortunately, sometime after Starbucks, Linda's wallet with all her cash and credit cards is stolen, so she has to stay back to take care of all the formalities and does not join us again until the next day.

On the other side, at the Chingiss Khan International Airport, we are met by B. Tserenchunt, known as 'Chunt, who is a young researcher at the National University. It is quite cold and

overcast, which gives an immediate impression of a high latitude northern location, which it is. The ride from the airport is on a bumpy 2-lane road. The landscape is barren and desert-like. We are in a large valley, surrounded on all sides by moderately high mountains. It is reminiscent of Nevada, without the cactuses or sagebrush. There is some construction on the outskirts, interspersed with small herds of sheep and cattle by the roadside. We arrive in the city about 20 minutes later.

Ulaan Baatar now has about 1 million people in the city and environs, which is about 40% of the country's small population. It is clean, but dusty and the air is increasingly polluted. The weather soon clears and it stays sunny and in the low 20s C (70s F) for the next 6 days. The nights and early mornings are quite cold, however, ranging in the low digits C, or the low 40s to the low 50s F.

We are booked in a 3-star hotel in the middle of the university district. It is rather dirty with few amenities, and our Chinese meeting co-organizers are unhappy. We arrange to go for a late lunch and walk to the nearest Mongolian BBQ chain restaurant, but it is packed. A more authentic BBQ is quite far, so we have to get a ride. 'Chunt starts to hitchhike. It is then that I realize three things about the local transport. The first is that there are almost no taxis (in fact I see only two the entire time) so the local convention is to take a bus (which we never do because of the language barrier) or to hail a private car and pay the driver for a lift. The going rate is 350 togrog per km, or \$0.25 (the exchange rate is almost 1400 togrog to \$1).

The second is that on closer inspection, some of the cars have the steering wheel on the right, even though most of them have it on the left and they drive on the right-hand side of the road, American style. And the third is that they all drive like they are racing horses in the grasslands. Cars have the right-of-way over pedestrians. This is a potentially deadly situation, especially since there are almost no traffic lights and lots of cars, making running and dodging across each street a necessity.

We end up hailing 3 cars in a matter of minutes and head for the Mongolian BBQ. It is now about 2:30 p.m. and everyone is hungry. The restaurant is very nice. There are two food bars, one for cooked food and one with cold and hot side dishes, and a drink bar. For the cooked food, you select among raw sliced meat (chicken, lamb, beef, pork, or horse) and a lot of cut up vegetables, plus about 10 spices and 10 sauces. In other words, you select and season your own dish by putting the ingredients in a bowl and then bring it to the cook who grills it on a huge, flat circular grill. You wait a few minutes and pick up the cooked meal. The side dishes were mostly prepared vegetable or meat salads, plus starches and soups. I skip the horse stomach salad and the lamb intestines and go for the home fries and some vegetable salads. I also get one of the local beers, Chinggis, which is really good. In fact, all the food (that I find palatable) is very good and fun. The whole feast costs about \$8.

After lunch, I decide to go to the local Buddhist monastery and several people from the group join me. We walk a couple of km and spend about ½ hour looking around the complex, which is very scenic and interesting. I buy a bunch of hand-painted note cards for \$0.50 each that I plan to use for Christmas.

[To be completed]

NEW ZEALAND

Notes from New Zealand
October 2003
by
P.F. Uhler

I arrive in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand, on the morning of Tuesday, the 5th of October. It is early spring and the air has that rarefied freshness that comes with the cold southerly wind off the Cook Strait. Wellington weather reminds me of the Pacific Northwest and the city itself is similar to Portland, OR.

I go directly to the Museum Hotel, located on the downtown waterfront across from the Te Papa National Museum. I have been to meetings and receptions at natural history museums all over the world—the Smithsonian in Washington, Brussels, Madrid, Campinas, Oaxaca, and I'm sure some other places—and they are always top notch. This museum too is impressive and a great place for the kind of event that I am attending, the Governing Board meeting of the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF).

I am scheduled to give a 3-hour presentation the next morning on the progress of the GBIF 3rd-year review, for which I am the lead consultant. I am accompanied for this presentation by Thomas Riisom and Kjeld Christensen of KPMG Denmark, the two other consultants on this review. Kjeld is very good natured and fun to be with, though generally incompetent, while Thomas is much more serious and business-like. Thomas shoulders a lot of the analytical burdens of the project, while I synthesize the information and try to make sense of their Dansk English. We also have a scientific steering committee helping us, although none of the members is present here.

On Wednesday morning I deliver our preliminary verdict: despite some flaws, GBIF must be continued beyond its initial 5-year period of funded activity. Everyone appears to be pleased and the Board members are generally highly complimentary after our presentation, which is a big relief. The two KPMG consultants and I use the next couple of days to interview various GBIF Board members, national delegates, and GBIF staff to get as much inside information as possible for our final report, due in about four months.

As usual, we also use this travel opportunity to go to some of the best restaurants in NZ, including the Chameleon at the Intercontinental Hotel (my favorite), Logan Brown (touted as the best restaurant in NZ), and Dockside (by, well, the dock side). Like me, my KPMG co-conspirators are gourmets and oenophiles, and we have so far wined and dined in the finest restaurants in Copenhagen, Oaxaca (the subject of another travel note), and Paris. Brussels, another gastronomical standout, is coming up for our final review presentation in April of the next year.

We are treated as well to a nice buffet dinner by our NZ GBIF hosts at the Skyline Restaurant, located next to the spectacular botanical garden overlooking the city. We arrive there by taking a cable car up the steep incline from the city's main business district below. After dinner, we walk down the hill and stop by a large colony of glow worms in an embankment on one of the side

streets. They look like little pale blue Christmas lights all tangled in the earth—quite a curious spectacle.

On Friday we go to the local Hertz office to pick up a Ford Fairlane, a grossly overpriced behemoth of a car that costs as much as my 4-star hotel room there. The only silver lining is that we are splitting the rental three ways.

After some discussion, we have decided to stay exclusively on the North Island in order to avoid the 3-hour ferry crossing each way over the strait. There is so much to see and do everywhere in this gorgeous land that it is a shame to spend a half day of our precious remaining time on the boat.

We head north on Rt. 1 along the west coast of the island. The first hour or so we are stuck in weekend traffic, mired in construction delays and heavy downpours. This inauspicious beginning gives way to lighter traffic and clearer skies as we leave the scenic coast and head inland. We drive another couple of hours through a large, long valley, west of the Ruahine mountain range. This part of the country is very pretty, but not spectacular. Surprisingly, there are few farms growing produce, as one might expect in such a fertile valley. In fact, we encounter few such farms on our 1300 km trek, with the exception of numerous vineyards—and we were not even in the main winemaking region. What we see instead virtually everywhere is sheep, sheep, and more sheep, interspersed here and there with a few herds of cattle and some horses. New Zealand has over 60 million sheep that are not otherwise exported as lamb.

Once we hit Waiouru, just south of the volcanic region and several state parks, the landscape changes dramatically. The verdant plains give way to a desolate, brownish terrain devoid of any plants except scrub brush. This desert is bordered on the west by two huge and active volcanoes, rising almost 3000 meters, and on the east by smaller mountains and canyons. We drive about a half hour through this scenery, which is reminiscent of Nevada. The high arid plateau suddenly descends into lush rainforest as we approach lake Taupo, our final destination for the night.

Lake Taupo is the largest freshwater lake in New Zealand and a favorite Kiwi holiday destination. It was formed some 2000 years ago when a volcano exploded, leaving just a crater. It takes about a half an hour to drive around the eastern shore and we arrive in the town of Taupo, as night falls.

Thomas has booked us a room in a place called the Caboose Hotel, which he found in the Lonely Planet travel guide. Apart from the intriguing railway name, it boasts an African motif from the Serengetti, but this is just a come on. In fact, I laugh out loud when I open the door to my room. I am housed—or I should say confined—in what is surely the smallest space I have slept in anywhere, including the sleeper car on the train from Beijing to Xi'an. It would make the Japanese salivate.

The room consists of a single bed and just enough space to walk in next to it. There is no place for a closet, just little wire hanger thingies that swing out from the wall next to the TV that is mounted in the corner at the foot of the bed. The bathroom, although clean, is tiny as well, but still a bit larger than the *salle de bain* at the Hotel Poussain in Paris, which retains the first prize in such dubious competition. In other words, I don't have to climb over the toilet to squeeze into

the shower, but it's close. Thomas and Kjeld are similarly cramped in their mini-cabooses, but it is too late to go looking for anything else, so we just cave in and go upstairs for what turns out to be a quite decent meal.

In the morning we assess our options for the next two days. Kjeld really wants to go skiing on the volcano, as do I. The mountain is completely obscured by clouds, however, and the weather report is not very encouraging, so we decide to hold out one more day in the hopes of skiable conditions. Instead, we go further north to the Maori enclave of Rotorua.

The entire region is geothermally active, with hot lava pools, fissures and vents emitting steam and sulfur gas, boiling mud, geysers, and other conditions volcanic. We stop at two such areas, one aptly named, Craters of the Moon, and the other next to a small private lake. We hike around both areas and take lots of pictures of the fascinating landscapes.

In between there is beautiful countryside, alternating between a rainforest type of terrain and smooth, electric green hillocks of manicured grass, courtesy of the ever-snacking sheep. We make it to Rotorua in the early afternoon. I am excited at the prospect of seeing some authentic Maori culture and shopping for unique indigenous artifacts. Boy am I wrong. The town is a dump, not in a poverty-stricken Sioux way, but completely non-descript, with cheap motels and even cheaper stores. As it turns out, most of the small-town and rural Kiwi land that we drive through is like this, an architectural wasteland devoid of charm.

We drive around the town a couple of times, looking for something—anything—interesting to see or do. We finally stop by a pedestrian mall in the town center in the hopes of finding some interesting gifts to buy and a decent lunch to eat. The shopping is slim pickings and overpriced, with all the native art stores closed for the weekend (although they do not look all that enchanting through our window browsing). We at least manage to stumble across an upscale café that serves surprisingly good food. On the way out of town we stop at a Maori artisan center, but it has a \$25 entry fee, which we consider too steep for our level of interest, and so we decide to return to Taupo.

By now it is late afternoon and raining hard. Near Taupo, we stop at the Huka river, near the falls (which we don't see), and which has a prawn farm (the first and only one I've seen), jet boat rides (closed in the rain, unfortunately), and an incredibly overpriced woodwork shop (pedestrian wooden bowls for \$hundreds!). Once in Taupo, we go bowling for a while and then get a very nice dinner—my one and only lamb dish in NZ.

The weather on Sunday morning fortunately is much better than Saturday and the ski report is good. It happens to be the last day of the ski season on that mountain. We head up to Mount Ruapehu as fast as we can, knowing that the spring weather in New Zealand is unpredictable. It is clear and sunny on the way up and the scenery is magnificent. We rent our equipment at the ski lodge and get on the slopes before 11:00. The signs on the mountain warn of volcanic eruptions and give evacuation instructions. There are supposedly almost 3 meters of snow still there, but the snow is wet and heavy at the base—real spring skiing. At the top is reasonably good packed powder and the skiing is great. But a few runs later, the clouds start to move in and the visibility deteriorates along with the snow. By the time we meet for lunch at 1:00 it is

drizzling, so we decide to call it a day. Not only are we already sore and tired, but we have a long drive ahead of us to Napier at Hawkes Bay, on the central east coast.

A couple of hours into the ride the rain gets worse and I become too tired to drive. In fact, we are all fatigued and we pull over for a short nap. Thomas then takes over the driving. I am sure the KPMG guys are relieved that I am no longer at the wheel since I have had three very close calls already because of my lack of familiarity with British style driving. Although I have done such driving before at length—in England and South Africa—and would do so again subsequently without any problems, somehow I am discombobulated by it this time. Thomas does quite well on the winding rural roads and I am happy to get a respite.

For the next three hours, the scenery is truly spectacular, changing one moment to the next. We encounter landscapes reminiscent of the Devon moors, the Great Smokey Mountains, Hawaiian rainforests, and the Pacific Northwest. We are fortunate that the rain is only intermittent and we are able to take a few pictures, though not enough to do justice to the nature around us. It is a magnificent ride.

We arrive at Napier at sunset and find an old art Deco hotel recommended by the tour book. It is on the bay and has a good seafood restaurant. Unlike the Caboose, the rooms are huge, but the décor is cheesy. It reminds me of old Borscht-belt hotels in the Jewish Alps of upstate New York, with formica paneling in the bathrooms and a tired mish-mash of furnishings. Both the hotel and the town at least have some atmosphere, if not elegance. The hotel also has an Irish pub with pool tables, so we go there after dinner.

The next and final morning in NZ I wake up early to catch my first sunrise on the Pacific. I have seen many sunsets on that ocean in my West Coast days, but I am compelled to witness it on the other side. I throw on a tee shirt and jeans and run out onto the beach. There is a small plaza bandstand on the beach side of the road, then a short strip of recently seeded grass, followed by a few meters of sand. It is blustery and chilly. The sky overhead is clear and blue, but a bank of dark clouds on the horizon obscures the rising sun. A thin crescent of the moon is visible, a worthy understudy of the main act that has failed to show.

I stand alone by the water and open my senses. The waves are gentle in the bay, truly pacific. They kiss the coarse sand and sweep up toward me, in rhythmic harmony, one after the other. I am accompanied only by the sea gulls, which remain uncharacteristically silent. There are no revelations, just tranquility.

After a while, I go to pack for the last ride in the country, back to Wellington and then the long series of flights home. The drive is scenic, although not as awesome as on the days before. I have another couple of near misses, but manage to navigate us all back in one piece.

On the flight from Wellington to Auckland late that afternoon, I pass over the volcanoes and lake Taupo. Only the cone of Mount Ruapehu protrudes above the cloud cover. As we prepare to land in Auckland, we fly by a shallow bay that glistens in the twilight, casting platinum shadows over the sand and water. The pictures would be fabulous, but my camera is packed away. I look forward to my next opportunity to visit here...

RUSSIA

**Notes from Russia
1996 to the Present**
by
Paul F. Uhler

I have now been in Russia three times—first to Novosibirsk and twice more to Moscow. My experiences there have been rather interesting, to say the least, so it's time to write them up.

We begin on 8 January 1996, at the start of one of the biggest snow storms ever to hit the East coast of the U.S., when I left Washington, DC for Novosibirsk. It was unusual to be escaping DC for Siberia in the middle of winter. I was going to Russia as part of an Office of Naval Research (ONR) series of guest lectures, mostly in Asian countries.

At the time, I was the associate executive director of the National Academy of Sciences' Commission on Physical Sciences, Mathematics, and Applications (CPSMA). I was accompanying a top computer scientist from Harvard, HG Kong, to speak at Akademgorodok—"the little Academy city"—of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Also accompanying us is an eminently forgettable program manager from the Office of Naval Research, whose name I appropriately don't recall.

One might reasonably assume that Akademgorodok, near Novosibirsk in the middle of Siberia, is a nowhere place. In the days of the Soviet Union, however, the complex was the premier research center outside of Moscow, world famous for its physical sciences, engineering, and mathematics accomplishments—the Russian equivalent of our Los Alamos National Laboratory.

In addition to the eminent lecturer and the petty bureaucrat, I was also bringing \$4K in cash from ONR to our host, Aleksandr Marchuk, the director of the Computer Science Institute there. You therefore might ask: why would the US Navy send a Chinese-born computer science expert to export his state-of-the-art knowledge to the premier Russian weapons lab, in the middle of landlocked Siberia in the dead of winter, with an NRC staffer bearing a sack full of cash furnished by the Navy's research lab? Hmmm.

I have a business class ticket on Lufthansa via Frankfurt. It is a very long trip. I leave Dulles airport at 6:00 p.m., a few hours before the airports in the entire East Coast region close, and arrive in Novosibirsk at 3:00 a.m., a day and a half later. Prof. Kong and I take the same connecting flight in Frankfurt, although we don't actually meet each other until we arrive. The flight is nearly empty, but I have been bumped up to first class the entire way and I recall an excellent venison dinner, definitely the best meal I ever had on an airplane—and would have on this trip.

We arrive at the bleak Novosibirsk airport in the middle of the night and get processed by the surly security staff. A driver meets us and we head for the hotel for foreigners at Akademgorodok. It is about -30° C. The hotel is not too bad and we get to rest until mid-morning, when the northern sun finally rises.

A guide is in the lobby to greet us. Svetlana is a researcher at the Applied Mathematics Institute. She speaks very good English. The air is still, but it is bitter cold. There is an indeterminate amount of snow on the ground—perhaps a packed meter. We trudge on a path on the squeaky snow through a little forest glen in the morning dusk at 9:30. The Computer Science Institute is only a few hundred meters from the hotel on the other side of the stand of trees, so the walk is not unreasonable even under the extreme circumstances.

Of course, I have come prepared with layers of clothing, boots with thermal socks, and a Russian-style fur hat with forehead and ear flaps that come in very handy. I bought the hat four years earlier for \$8 in Beijing on Wangfujing dajie, before it became the westernized designer fashion mecca after the turn of the millennium. In fact, I bought two hats at that time and gave one to my son, Alex, since they were such a good deal.

In addition to all this winter wear, I am sporting an ordinary camel hair coat—the kind you could buy in any department store in the West. The coat does not comport with Svetlana’s standards, however, since she is decked out in a full length fur coat and stylish fur hat. She takes one look at me and declares my coat “symbolic”, much to my amusement. With 3 or 4 layers of clothes under it, however, I remain warm enough.

We soon arrive at the Computer Science Institute and are greeted warmly by Aleksandr and his colleagues. Aleksandr is the son of a previous president of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), G.I. Marchuk, and thus has the pedigree that earns him instant name recognition and status even in post-Soviet Russia.

As we quickly find out, however, all is not well in Akademgorodok. In fact, the complex, despite its great importance to the Russian military-industrial defense establishment, has reputedly lost more than 90% of its Soviet-era funding by 1995. The whole research enterprise is running on fumes and the various institutes are scrambling to get research contracts and grants from their former (?) enemies in the West. This means that daddy’s big name in the by-gone era is of limited monetary value, particularly to the prospective European, Japanese, and U.S. industry customers for whatever research services and products that Marchuk’s Institute might provide. Akademgorodok has quickly morphed from the beneficiary of a bureaucratic socialist sinecure to a western-style meritocracy and the survival of the fittest. The days of automatic scientific support in Russia are now officially over.

We get a tour of the crumbling and poorly equipped facility, followed by a series of “dog and pony” presentations by the Institute staff. I give a short description of the U.S. Academies and the CPSMA. HG Kong then gives his lecture, I hand off the sack of cash, and after a brief respite at the hotel we all head off to the banquet in the darkness and cold of the early evening.

They still have a free shuttle service throughout the complex, so we take one of these stripped-down Russian buses down the street. How cold is it? It is so cold that there are snow drifts inside the bus. Yes, the snow brought in on the passengers’ shoes slowly accumulates inside and doesn’t melt, probably for months.

I have prepared for the gala banquet by writing out a toast to our hosts in Russian. I brought my Russian dictionary and limited knowledge of two years of Russian language instruction for the occasion. I had studied po-Ruski at the University of Oregon and then for a few months with my grandmother in private lessons at Maria Tolstoy's (Lev's granddaughter) apartment on E. 96th St. in Manhattan. I tell our ONR apparatchik that I am going to give the toast in Russian, thinking he would welcome the attempt at warming up the cross-cultural relations, but the dour turd warns me not to do this. Presumably, he wants to make as few waves as possible and doesn't like the thought of me saying something he cannot understand.

Koniechno, I go ahead with it anyway. It is the standard kind of well wishing pleasantries with no state secrets revealed. Naturally, it is a big hit with the Ruskis, particularly after we have already consumed several shots of vodka to accompany a series of previous toasts.

Unfortunately, this is only the beginning. The banquet food is mediocre, mostly various mystery meat cold cuts, which I eschew, marinated fish and root veggies, which are palatable, and bread. All there is to drink, however, is more vodka and Georgian brandy, as well as some horrible orange soda that appears to be made from some powdered mix that leaves solid dark orange flecks on the side of the glass. There is no water, probably because it is radioactive—or worse. I take a sip of the soda and opt for more vodka and then brandy, which is really good, but lethal. After more shots with the dinner I lose count of the shots and I am inebriated by the time we finish eating.

A couple of the Russian scientists—I remember Georgi from the Nuclear Physics Institute, who was particularly affable and probably an agent—then invite me to one of their apartments for after dinner conversation. The ONR apparatchik warns me not to go—this time with good reason—but I foolishly disregard his admonitions, not only in view of his diminished credibility in my eyes, but hey, I'm drunk. It turns out to be the last time I see him and HG, since they both leave to go back to the U.S. the next morning, while I stay one extra day to see what I can see.

I go visit with the Ruskis who try to ply me with more booze and extract any hidden information I may have about our curious visit. They suspect that there are some ulterior motives and a secret agenda, which there probably is, but I am in the dark. After some animated discussion and increasingly slurry speech, I black out, so that I am *really* in the dark. Fortunately, they make sure I make it back to the hotel, since getting lost outside would be a death sentence.

Needless to say, I wake up the next morning with a doozey of a hangover. The combination of massive quantities of unadulterated booze, coupled with a total lack of non-alcoholic liquids, make me one unhappy camper. To make things worse, I am roused out of bed by a phone call from Svetlana, who is in the lobby. She has taken the day “off” to serve as my guide around the complex and the city. I have no time to wash, eat, or otherwise get in some semblance of a civilized state, but after all, I am in Siberia.

We get in the car and I spend the next few hours on an exotic winter tour of Novosibirsk, trying not to puke. It is a real challenge.

Svetlana tells me that in the scant five years since the dissolution of the USSR, life expectancy in Siberia shockingly has also fallen by five years, from 61 to 56 years generally, and from 56 to 51 years for men. The social safety net of the old regime, such as it was, has disappeared. Very high unemployment, severe alcoholism, a grossly polluted environment in some places, the loss of basic medical and social services, and the harsh natural elements have created the perfect storm. The results are abject poverty worthy of the least developed countries, pervasive despondency, and accelerated death. Suicide is a leading cause. At least most other impoverished countries have a more benign environment. The statistics are made even more acute by the large-scale exodus of the privileged class: those successful enough to go elsewhere—anywhere—leaving behind their less educated, poorer, and sicker brethren.

My tour has an added bonus of excitement because all the roads in the area are covered with packed snow and ice. It is unclear how slippery they are, but we do not appear to have any problems navigating them. I suspect that this is because it is so cold and dry that the frozen stuff mimics the properties of concrete more than it does of water. When we enter Novosibirsk the roads turn into boulevards of perhaps 8 lanes of white expanse, which is good. Even though there is little traffic, there are no lanes marked and the drivers leave a lot to be desired, as you can no doubt imagine!

We make several stops in the city to see the main highlights and to do some shopping. The main points of interest are Soviet-era government buildings and a couple of czarist-era orthodox churches. The shopping is meager. I buy some well-worn coins from czarist days for about \$15, but they really aren't worth anything except a curiosity. I buy them just to spend some money there. There is hyper-inflation in Russia, so the exchange rate is rather good. I spend 350,000 rubles for a cup of tea, which I believe amounted to \$0.90—too much for most of the locals. I still have a 100,000 ruble note that I saved for posterity in my desk (and which I gave away at a bar in Geneva, CH some years later).

At every stop I am confronted by the elements. Although it is a crystal clear, sunny day, there is a slight breeze unlike the previous day. It is a balmy -27° C, but the slight wind is like daggers on what little exposed skin I have on my face as well as on the fingers of one hand every time I get out of the car to take some pictures. The stops are nonetheless somewhat therapeutic for my vicious hangover, which slowly improves as the day wears on.

We arrive back at Akademgorodok around 2:30 p.m. and Svetlana takes me to the executive dining room of the complex. She tells me to have anything I want, which is very little given the way I feel. All I can manage is some beef soup and bottled water. It helps.

She starts to tell me about how her husband, also a mathematician, is a real shit and how unhappy she is there. She wants to know what it's like in Washington. She is obviously going fishing. After lunch we go to the hotel and she accompanies me to the elevator. She gives every indication that she wants to come with me to my room. She is quite attractive, a pleasant mix of European and Asiatic features, but it is not to be, even if I felt half-way human. We part ways and I never hear from her again. I hope she made it out.

I take a much needed bath when I get to my room. I have just enough time to get cleaned up and presentable before my next appointment—dinner at the Marchuks. I almost call it off, but reconsider since it would be rude to reject my host’s generous invitation.

The Marchuks have a nice, cozy apartment, no doubt much nicer than most due to his family’s prior status. Aleksander’s wife is an economist who has studied at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and travels occasionally to the West. We have a pleasant evening with a broad ranging conversation. They both speak very good English.

Aleksandr tells me that it got down to -41°C the night before, a record for that date in Novosibirsk. The -41° temperature is the point at which the Celsius and Fahrenheit scales intersect. He goes on to say that he lost some of his toes to frostbite from playing winter soccer there in his youth. Apparently, it is better than playing in the summer, when it gets really hot and the mosquitoes will eat you alive. In the springtime, it is impossible because there are about two months of deep mud as the snow melts. It’s so bad that they have a name for it, which I forget. But there are a few nice weeks at the end of summer and very early fall before the cold and darkness return. Like I said, nice place.

The next morning, I visit the Computer Science Institute one last time to speak with Aleksander’s colleagues about a couple of software apps they are developing. They seem to be bright and competent, and assuredly hungry for more sponsorship. They have some funders, but want more. Their software looks like it could be marketable, but I really don’t have the expertise to evaluate it. I ask some American software mavens when I get back to DC, but there are no takers.

I leave on a packed Lufthansa flight that afternoon with other disturbed refugees. No room for a first class upgrade this time. Since we are going in a sun-synchronous westerly direction, I am able to observe the vast Siberian landscape for hours, with nary a sign of human life and ample time to ponder what I’ve just experienced.

* * *

My second trip to Russia, a decade later, is much more sedate. My flight from Cairo to Moscow on Aeroflop, however, is another story (see also my Notes from Alexandria, Egypt). The plane reeks of urine from the abysmal toilets in the aft and I spend a fitful night on the filthy seats in my unoccupied row.

I am invited to Moscow along with two other U.S. CODATA Committee members, Bonnie Carroll, president of Information International Associates, and Bob Chen, director of the Consortium for International Earth Science Information Network at Columbia University. Bob is also the Secretary General of the international CODATA and Bonnie is the U.S. National Delegate to CODATA. I am the U.S. CODATA director, in addition to now being the director of the Office of International S&T Information. Our host is Alexei Gvishiani, the chair of the Russian CODATA Committee and director of the Geophysical Institute at the RAS.

Alexei is an affable fellow, whom I have known by then for a few years from various CODATA activities. The prior year he attended a U.S. CODATA meeting and I invited him and some other U.S. members to our house for dinner. Besides being an accomplished scientist and research bureaucrat, Alexei is also the grandson of Andrei Kosygin, the Russian vice-premier under Brezhnev. Like Aleksandr Marchuk, he is part of the nomenklatura of the ancien regime, which still buys some influence.

To his great embarrassment, however, he once confided to me that he almost got taken for a lot of money through the notorious Nigerian e-mail scam that promises to transfer \$millions if only you would send your bank account information. He foolishly did send it, but was able to block the scam before his money was siphoned off.

Although Alexei has ostensibly invited us to Moscow to develop some bilateral cooperation, his main reason we surmise is to butter us up to support his candidacy for President of CODATA for the election later that fall in Beijing. The CODATA Presidency is a position that was impressive to my 11-year old son a few years back, but not to many others. Be that as it may, there is an underlying dynamic at play during our journey.

I arrive at Sheremetovo airport in the early morning after my poor trip from Cairo, and I am picked up by Alexei's driver. I go to the hotel paid for by the Geophysical Institute. This turns out to be a Soviet-era establishment operated by the Ministry of Defense. Big time. Not only does it have all the physical shortcomings one might imagine, but the service is equally bad, testing the patience of all of us throughout the 4-day stay.

Without going into the chronological details of the trip, it's worth recounting some impressions and highlights. I should begin with a description of the people, particularly the general population. To begin with, the most striking characteristic of the majority of citizens, whether in Moscow and most assuredly anywhere else, is that they look like the bought their wardrobe in a Salvation Army second-hand store. This non-descript plain clothing permeates society. It may be a hangover from the "Soviet Man" zeitgeist, which placed an official primacy on the self-effacement of the individual (except, of course, for the nomenklatura). But it well may be the result of a lack of buying power, a general cultural disaffection or malaise of the psyche, an innate lack of style, or some other (combination of) factors. I just don't know and certainly wouldn't ask. All I do know is that the vast majority of Russians has no basic knowledge of style in clothing, or simply don't care.

The same syndrome is generally true of the constructed environment. The colors, the style, the design of most non-traditional (that is, Soviet or post-Soviet) buildings, places, or things, especially the furniture, are abysmal. Much of it is the aforementioned effect of the Soviet mentality, when bourgeois style was derided pathologically. One can go to an upscale café in the most ritzy part of town and still encounter décor and furniture reeking of the social realism of the 1960s, although furnished much more recently. The colors one often encounters are schmaltzy burnt orange, light creamy greens, electric yellows, and drab browns. Aeroflop's colors are a combination of Halloween orange and light green. Year round.

At the same time, there has been some attempt, at least in Moscow and presumably in the other historically rich czarist enclaves, to restore the crumbling historical venues and with it some of the commercial restoration of restaurants, bars, and shops, especially in remodeled underground cellars. These places have a medieval cachet with modern trappings. Prague comes to mind as having done that really well. Moscow has just a smattering of it, as far as I can tell. There are, of course, some modern skyscrapers and establishments. The latter, however, strike me as mostly gangster chic. That is, very expensive construction and materials, coupled with very poor taste and frequently very bad craftsmanship and inattention to detail.

While the vast majority of the “unwashed masses” may look like they escaped from the bargain basement, there also are more beautiful women there per square meter, whether well dressed or not, than almost any other place I’ve been, except southern California or southern Fla. A substantial fraction of these women, mostly under 30, are dressed to kill, usually decked out in minis, stockings, and high heels. These strumpets are a package of evocative sexual expression, (dès)habilement, and general Attitude. Such girls are ubiquitous, especially in the city center, campuses, and of course nightclubs. They are in search of the excess riches of the ruling class; the unlucky ones end up as sex slaves of the ultraviolent mobsters, or worse.

Which brings me to the next, and most dangerous, category of social pathology—the corrupt power structure, both in the public and private spheres. These come in several categories. There are the government apparatchiks and former (and current) KGBskis who have parlayed their preferential status into greater power and fortune—including president put-in himself. There also are the mafiosos outside government, who play along with the apparatchiks and the police to get along. They range from the fabulously wealthy gangsters who make their money the old fashioned criminal way, to the quasi-criminal “bisnismen” who control whole sectors of the economy, or just the lucrative crumbs. The vast number of these comprises the crooked wannabes—in the bureaucracies, the intelligence services and the police force, and in the “private” sector, who emulate the criminal and corrupt behavior in the hopes of striking it rich.

I don’t know any of these bad actors (at least I don’t think I do), although I seem to run into one at Alexei’s Geophysical Institute. The deputy director there appears to be some sort of pimp. He shows Bob and me pictures of some very good looking “graduate students” and offers to fix us up with some for the night. We turn him down, but leave the larger question of his actual work unanswered.

The food throughout the stay is generally very good. We eat at expensive Georgian, Ukrainian, and Russian restaurants for both lunch and dinner. Thank God we don’t have to eat at the hotel, where the breakfast is abysmal and the service even worse. The vodka flows freely, though not to excess—at least not by Russian standards. The last evening we enjoy dinner at the fancy apartment of Alexei and his wife, who are very gracious and cultured hosts.

We also have some time for sightseeing, cultural activities, and shopping. On the cultural front, we go to the well-known Tretyakov Gallery to see some paintings, mostly portraits of past sociopaths. This is only mildly interesting. We also get to go to the famous Bolshoi Theater to see Mme. Butterfly. Apparently, we are well connected, at least for cultural pursuits, since we get 4th row center seats in the orchestra section. It is a minimalist production staged by an

American director from Texas. The first set goes quite well, but half of the audience leaves at the intermission. We slowly realize why as the second loong set slowly unfolds, with Mme. Butterfly singing at length and off key, with each passing minute being longer than the one before. That's my Bolshoi story. And I sent a postcard of it to my Ma to prove it.

The sightseeing is limited to the city center, where I think most of the sights to see are located. It is very impressive. The Red Square and Kremlin are beautifully restored and maintained. Gilded onion heads everywhere. We go on tours of each, minus the viewings of the dead Commie deities in their glass-encased crypts. The GUM (main department store) on Red Square is like any other hyper-chic mall in the West and just as expensive, if not more so. We do a lot of window shopping. I imagine Lenin turning in his climate-controlled sarcophagus in ideological disgust across the square. Plus ça change...

Our seminars go quite well, but are boring. See www.nationalacademies.org/brdi for the results. They are just window dressing for the main event, the meeting with the head Academician for the Geophysical Sciences Section of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The RAS building, where we meet, is an imposing, modern structure. The meeting with the Academician is designed to solidify the U.S. CODATA's support for Alexei's candidacy for president of the international CODATA the following month. As a sweetener, we are told that the RAS is prepared to donate \$50K to the international CODATA in the near future, although the actual quid pro quo is never stated. Alexei ends up losing by one vote at the CODATA General Assembly in Beijing to Krishan Lal, the other nominee who is from India, and lo and behold, the \$50K donation never materializes.

I am the last of the U.S. group to leave Moscow, as I have one more stop to make to give a talk at the Belgian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Brussels, before I head back to Washington. I have a final lunch at a fancy restaurant in the city center, which claims to be French and sets me back about \$100. My advice is for the Russians to improve on their own ethnic cuisine...

* * *

My third and final trip thus far is only a scant four years later, also to Moscow. I am invited by the Moscow State University Higher School of Economics (and Law) by a law professor, Irina Bogdanovskaya. I met Irina at an A2K (Access to Knowledge) conference at Yale Law School a few years back. Irina is a heavy-set, 60ish woman, who is very energetic, but who unfortunately slowly waddles while she walks because of her weight and swollen ankles. She was impressed with my *Policy Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Governmental Public Domain Information*, which I authored as a consultant for UNESCO in preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society (see http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15862&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) and which she had translated into Russian (it is also available in French, Spanish, and Portuguese). I am flattered and pleased that my work is having some effect, especially in a country that really needs a dose of openness in governance and government information. (As an aside, I also have conducted a regional workshop in Peru on these Policy Guidelines and was contacted by an expert from Morocco, who held a meeting about it as well.)

I take Aeroflop again, this time a non-stop from JFK. I had requested flying on United and Lufthansa via Frankfurt, to avoid such an eventuality. They actually bought the Frankfurt itinerary the first time, but the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland erupted a couple of days before my intended departure in April, so the trip had to be postponed. The earliest I could reschedule it was two months hence, since I had week-long trips to Jamaica, Brussels, and Santiago in-between. The second itinerary they purchased was on Aeroflop, however, in order to avoid the connection in Germany in case the volcano were to erupt again. This made sense and since they were buying, I couldn't complain. The flight was better than the one from Cairo before, but still sub-standard in terms of facilities and service.

Moscow looks pretty much unchanged, with many of the same dysfunctions in evidence. But before I get to the Moscow stories, I need to chronicle my travails at the Russian Embassy's consular office in Washington. I have been to a number of consulates, including those of Asian, African, and Latin American countries, and this is far and away the worst.

To begin with, the room is very small for the intended purpose and the number of people seeking visas, at least in the springtime, is large. Moreover, most of the people there are couriers with multiple visa forms to process, so each one of them takes 15-30 minutes to complete. The small blessing in disguise is that if each of their clients were to show up in person, like me, the line would be snaking out the embassy.

The room is old and dirty. There are no numbers to take, no organized lines, and no seats except two at a small table. The seats and table are there so that people can sit and fill out their visa forms, or more likely, correct the ones they have already filled out, but had rejected (like me). There is a box on the wall for visa forms, but it is empty. The clock on the wall is broken. A TV between the two visa windows is stuck on some scene from a newscast. You get the picture. The best entertainment is watching the newcomers at the door encountering the mess inside for the first time and seeing their expressions. Some just leave.

The women inside the glassed-in visa windows are (of course) humorless bureaucrats. Their job is to check the visa applications and passports for compliance before giving you a ticket to pick up your passport with the processed visa some days hence. They do it "by the book," which is to say, they have the book and only share some of the information with the poor applicants, who need to figure out what it is they really want and how to provide it. The visa form itself is designed so that there are many traps and possibilities for rejection.

For example, there is a question asking the applicant to list all the countries visited over the past 10 years. I am somewhat unusual, because I have visited about 40 countries during that period, many multiple times, but there is space on the form for perhaps 4 of them. Since I don't remember how I did this before, I dutifully type out all the countries and the dates of the visits, which I either recall or find stamped in my current and former passports. This takes me some time. I indicate on the form to see this addendum, which is attached. This, along with other "irregularities" I have on my form, is deemed unacceptable by the apparat-chick. She banishes me to the back of the room to sit at the little table and subject myself to some re-education and penance for not conforming. No visa for you! I go back and successfully complete the process with my \$140 bank check and am told to come back 10 days later.

I pick up the visa after the 10 days, again waiting in the same line, only to discover that the duration of the visa is a few weeks, just up until the day I am supposed to leave Moscow, rather than some fixed 6-month period of validity LIKE ALL OTHER COUNTRIES DO. So, of course, when the damn E---- volcano blows its stack and I am forced to reschedule the trip, I HAVE TO DO THIS ALL OVER AGAIN to get another visa. Except this time, because of other intervening international travel and the unavailability of my passport, I have to pay TWICE as much for the privilege of an expedited 3-day processing.

Fortunately, my hosts at the State University reimburse me for both visas, plus the taxis, because the D.C. metro doesn't run near the Embassy. Also, fortunately, the E----volcano didn't explode while I am there because with the duration of the visa timed so conveniently to expire the very same day of the booked departure, any further delay means that you are in violation of Russian law and are effectively under house arrest in your hotel until you are able to leave the country!

Now for some stories of dysfunction in the country itself. Although I am put up this time in a newly refurbished 1-bedroom apartment, which overall is very nice, there are numerous small irritations and lapses in design that remind me of where I am. There is a new desk with a computer and Ethernet cable, but the internet isn't connected. I end up using the free wi-fi service at the McDonalds downtown and at the computer lab in the University. There is a closet in the apartment, but it is used as storage for extra furniture, so there is nowhere to hang my clothes, just open shelving. There's a large flat-screen TV, but the remote doesn't work.

The bathroom is modern and clean, but various other errors abound. The shower has a hand-held hose, but the attachment on the wall is loose and doesn't hold it up, so I have to hold it (which is a big pet peeve of mine in traditional European bathrooms). The shower basin is very shallow—less than 2 cm or so—meaning that any backup of water would immediately cause an overflow. There is no soap dish on the wall or anywhere else, nor is there a mat to step on upon exiting the shower. At least there is warm water, though it's not very hot. I improvise with the bath mat and use one of the hand towels I am given (the towels come in garish plum, dark yellow, and creamy green colors). The next day there is a mat, one with bristles that says "WELCOME" and that you would normally find outside a house in front of the door to brush off your shoes. There is a built-in soap dispenser on the wall above the sink, but it is evident from its pristine condition that it has never been filled with soap.

Finally, there is a large balcony from which I can see the Red Square in the distance, about 2 km straight down the boulevard. It has a great view of most of the city from my 9th floor perch. But the railing around the perimeter is precariously low and would not block me from falling to my death if I accidentally tripped or lost my balance. Perhaps its low level has some deeper significance, but where I'm from, it looks like an accident waiting to happen and with strict liability attached.

The apartment "hotel" is run by the university itself and is located on several floors of what is otherwise an office building, although it has a separate entrance on the side. There is a cleaning lady, who does a real good job, but she apparently lives immediately next door to me and doubles up as one of the floor watchers to make sure that the distrusted foreigners tow the line, a hangover from the Soviet times. The front desk is sometimes staffed and when it is, you had

better speak some Russian. Fortunately, I do, at least enough to negotiate the basics, and the clerk compliments me on my linguistic proficiency.

The only other employee in the lobby is the ever-present guard who never speaks or has any semblance of a facial expression, and with whom I pick up and drop off the bulky apartment key. On my last night there I ask him to give me a wake up call at 4:30 a.m., since I have a car reserved to pick me up for the airport at 5:00, but of course he doesn't call. Fortunately, I awake with my own nervous energy. I find him asleep on the lobby bench when I am leaving. Perhaps a few rubles the night before would have improved his memory, but I doubt it.

Despite these various deficiencies and inefficiencies, the apartment hotel is a small treasure in Moscow, a city that is otherwise full of accommodations that are either hideously expensive or hideously bad. In light of its positive attributes—modern, spacious, clean, well located (two blocks from the Leninsky Prospekt metro station), and no doubt relatively inexpensive (in my case, free)—it is definitely a keeper for any possible future visits.

Other examples of the underlying social problems that are endemic that I encountered there were on the metro. I used it every day to go to and from the university and dinners. The metro itself is very impressive. Although Irina claims to like the Washington, DC metro better, I think it puts it to shame, except perhaps for the appearance of the basic train cars themselves. It is clean, cheap, and runs amazingly frequently, even at off hours. I never have to wait more than 1-2 minutes, even in the late evening. All the very long escalators (the very deep metro was designed as a nuclear bomb shelter in the Cold War, as in other Soviet colonies) appear to work, unlike the tragically procured and maintained escalators in D.C., which are always on the fritz.

The metro reminds me of the difference between the Soviet and U.S. space programs. The Soviet engineering is no frills, but it really works and goes on and on. The U.S. space program is full of gold-plated spacecraft, which sometimes don't work and at other times perform brilliantly, but with little continuity and lots of needless expense.

The employees and the metro police, however, are troglodytes. When I first buy the card of 10 metro rides, I assume from its appearance and my experience in other metro systems that one inserts the card into the turnstile and it deducts one ride, printing out the remaining value or number of rides. The card is made of heavy paper, not plastic, and indeed there is a slot on the front of the turnstiles that appears to be made for this purpose.

Well, I stand in front of one of the turnstiles and keep trying to jam the card into the slot, to no avail. A female metro cop is standing a couple of meters from me, fully aware of my confusion and having nothing to do except watch people go through the turnstiles. I surmise that she would either ignore any malfeasants—or shoot them. She won't help me despite my obvious inability to enter and pleas for some assistance. After the eighth time or so of trying to get the card to go into the slot, she relents with a surly attitude and shows me that the card is magnetic, despite its flimsy appearance. I just need to place it over the card reader, which is not self-evident. It then deducts the money for a ride and indicates I can go through. The woman is unbelievable, but typical of the low-level employees who are poorly paid, have no opportunity for graft, and resent it.

On the second evening of the trip, I see a small troop of cops investigating an apparent death on a metro platform. A man is covered with a police blanket, with just his feet sticking out. I suppose he could be passed-out drunk, but by the looks of the police activity I conclude he is dead drunk.

I encounter other inebriates on the metro and on the street, some swaying so precariously that you think you could keel them over with just a small poke of the finger. The public spaces immediately adjacent to each metro station are hangouts for drinking and socializing, mostly by men around the happy hours after work. There are lots of “happy hours” throughout the day, though. To round things out, there are desperately poor and maimed beggars, outcasts of the brave new post-Soviet world, old women shouting out their prayers for orthodox salvation, men with missing limbs, and other Dickensian unfortunates.

The meetings at the Higher School of Economics over two days are quite interesting. I give one talk on open knowledge environments in publicly-funded research and another one on government information policy, based on my UNESCO Policy Guidelines. There also are several presentations by the graduate students in the situation in Russia on information policy and practice, especially with regard to the internet. These presentations and the ensuing discussions are quite high level and I am impressed, much more so by the students than the profs. There are two interpreters there just for me.

There is one very engaging student from Kasnoyarsk in Siberia. He is well versed in the Federalist papers, the current economic situation throughout the world, internet policy, and the politics at home. He is brilliant and I end up talking with him for the better part of an hour at the reception, which they call a “fourchet”, after the first day. I am sure he will do well if he doesn’t get mauled by the machine. Or maybe he is just a real good spy in training, since he speaks very good English and claims to consider himself “an American.”

On the second day, I am also asked to critique a short article written in English by one of the younger law profs, Tatyana, and to suggest ways we might collaborate. The article, even with the understandable language difficulty, is totally unpublishable, methodologically unsound and substantively deficient. I struggle to give her a diplomatic critique. I also agree to contact some listservs in the U.S. and EU, which are focused on cyberlaw and public sector information law.

I am visiting during the first round of the World Cup soccer matches, so I try to find some places to watch the ones played in the evening. The TV in my apartment doesn’t have them. The first night in Moscow I eat with Irina and her husband, Sergei, who is a Canadaphile and very pleasant. We eat at a well-known chain of traditional Russian restaurants called Yolky Polky. It is actually very good and afterwards I find a TGI Fridays in one of the fancy shopping centers downtown to watch Mexico beat South Africa.

The next day, after the fourchet, I go to a Ukrainian place, named after a great folk hero, Taras Bulba, where I have another good meal. The last day I am taken to a fancy Georgian place for lunch that is overpriced and OK. I then go to a famous monastery that is a UNESCO World Heritage site and where the czars and nobility dumped their wives when they were unable to divorce them. After that, I stop in a nearby high-class Italian restaurant and bar where I watch Serbia beat Germany.

My final dinner is at another expensive Italian place near the Red Square. The Red Square at sunset looks like a Disneyland, with GUM lit up like a Christmas tree. The restaurant is called the White Castle. It is a subterranean place with loud disco music, but I opt to stay because they have TVs and another match is coming up. It looks like a mafia establishment, but the food is pretty good, especially the tagliatelle with the porcini and cream sauce, washed down with a respectable Chianti. I am shocked to discover that they do not have the World Cup on, only some music videos.

On my final morning, I am picked up very early by a driver hired by the University. He drives rather slowly, considering the hour and the lack of traffic, but I soon find out why. We pass two speed traps on the highway in rapid succession, no doubt another petty scam for self-enrichment by the local police—the ones who weren't too hung over to get up at that hour of the day.

I am dropped off at a very modern and attractive airport terminal, but it turns out to be the wrong one. I find out that there is a free shuttle bus to the other terminals, which are a few km away. I am told that the bus stops at the lower street level. I take the elevator down as far as it goes, two of the three floors. So I get off and look for another elevator to go the last floor down, but it is the same story. There are no stairs and no signs. There are escalators, but they too are only serving the top three floors. I can see the lower street level because of the open-air architecture, but I can't get there. Perhaps we are supposed to jump. After going back and forth on the second level a couple of times (I see other passengers doing the same so I know I'm not crazy), I run into a cleaning woman who points me to what looks like a service elevator, unmarked, off the main hallway. It goes down the final floor. Unbelievable!

Out on the street it is now about 6:30 in the morning. It is June 19, one day shy of the summer solstice. The sun has been up for over two hours already at this northern latitude (setting about 11:00 p.m.). I can see my breath condense in the nippy air as I wait for the bus. Goodbye, Russia, and good riddance.

SENEGAL

Notes from Senegal
September 1999
by
P.F. Uhler

The Air France flight from Paris is packed, mostly, it appears, with people returning home. The movie being shown is a remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. It's a very glitzy and high-tech display of ostentatious wealth. I wonder what the Dakarois think, although the ones who can afford to go to Paris are probably among the kleptocracy.

After an interminable wait for my luggage at the VIP Salle d'Honneur, my host takes me to the hotel, a 4-star French ocean-side resort, which might as well be in San Diego or the Riviera. The place has a couple of outdoor pools, tennis courts, golf course, and all the luxurious amenities taken for granted in rich countries. It masks the reality that lies outside the gated compound.

A Sunday of rest lounging by the pool with femmes fatales and devouring fine French cuisine provides me with the requisite fortitude for the next full day of meetings in downtown Dakar. I take the first of a series of dilapidated taxis, all of which turn out to be in various advanced stages of decomposition and layers of grime. I am going to meet my host, Abdoulaye, a seemingly enterprising scientist who has carved himself a niche in the Senegalese bureaucracy in international cooperation for scientific data programs. He is evidently from a wealthy family, struggling for almost five years on his own nickel to get official recognition from the Senegalese government for his efforts. Abdoulaye, who studied agronomy in Paris and at several American universities, is a well-intentioned man who has remarkably little to show for his efforts, except for a nice website and hard-won official government status.

I am in Senegal to lay the groundwork for a couple of regional workshops on digital data management and policy. I also want to meet with intellectual property officials to influence their thinking on legal approaches to digital information protection, particularly in an effort to counter some ill-advised European Union intellectual property policy.

The ride from my French oasis to downtown Dakar takes about half an hour and follows Martin Luther King boulevard along the ocean. The scenery looks pretty much like that of a major city in any developing country. In the outskirts of the city there are a few fancy villas separated by high walls from the surrounding sea of poverty. The center of Dakar is a Potemkin village of government bureaucracies, international organizations, and hotels.

After meetings with officials at several ministries, I feel foolishly adventurous and ask my host to drop me off at the main shopping district, the Marché Sandaga. It reminds me of old Delhi, with crowded rows of shacks stuffed with low-grade goods. I start to walk around in my business attire, trying not to attract the inevitable unwanted attention of hawkers and street hustlers. I am left alone until I step inside an open-air fabric store to buy some colorful cotton cloth for my secretary. As soon as I indicate that I am interested in buying something, much less purchase it, the dam breaks and I am mobbed by merchants and various undesirable hangers-on who view me as a cash cow ready to be milked. Solicitous, greedy, persistent, they follow me down the

street, insisting that I look here, stop there, buy that. I go with the flow wearing a frozen grin on my face, rather than attempting to resist or flee.

After more than two hours of this, I have purchased the cloth, a cheap native shirt, a small mask, and a little Deux Chevaux made out of discarded soda cans, a third-world staple. I am about \$50 lighter and that much wiser. I have only one last hustler to ditch, Alfonse, who claims to be my only true friend in this pack of wolves. Alfonse is a surprisingly impressive character who speaks fluent English and French, and demonstrates a command of German and Danish, in addition to his native Wolof. He claims to have studied in England and spent some time in Denmark. He is from the southern province of Cassamance, a nowhere place that is currently in revolt against the central government. He is very bright and probably very dangerous, trying all the while to set me up for a big take. If he lived in the U.S., I would peg him to become a drug kingpin. I give him a thousand CSFs (almost \$2) and some Camel straights that I brought along for such eventualities to try to get rid of him. I slam the taxi door as he tries to squeeze in. Close call.

* * *

The next morning I take another rickety jalopy to Abdoulaye's official hole-in-the-wall. He takes me to meet his good friend and colleague, Prof. Malick Diop, MD, at a local hospital. I expect another vapid bureaucratic rendezvous. What transpires instead turns out to be an unforgettable experience with a remarkable individual. After a short wait in the ante room, run by a very elegant woman, who turns out to be Mrs. Diop, we are ushered into Dr. Diop's office.

The doctor is a very soft-spoken, almost taciturn, man who lets his actions speak louder than all the bluster of the bureaucrats I have met thus far in Dakar. He is the head of the Otolaryngology (ear, nose & throat) department, chief surgeon, main administrator, and principal professor in his area of specialization. The miracles he works and the hardships he encounters are slowly revealed during the visit. He is a world-class surgeon, having gotten his medical degree in Paris and studied as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Minnesota medical school.

Dr. Diop and his team of nine surgeons treat over 10,000 patients annually. He tells me that his department is the primary teaching program for otolaryngology for the entire West African region. He has developed plans for construction of a new facility, which is to break ground in the next few weeks, but without any equipment or resources to make things work. These facts are revealed to me by Abdoulaye, Dr. Diop's friend since high school. The good doctor is not the type of person to toot his own horn. Instead, he suggests we take a quick tour of the department.

We begin with the in-patient wards. They are presented, intentionally or unintentionally, in an increasing order of emotional impact. Our first stop is in the women's ward. In the United States, otolaryngology surgery typically involves tonsillectomies, the fixing of deviated septums for relief of blocked sinuses, cosmetic adjustments, and, of course, the treatment of cancers that arise in these parts of the anatomy. Not surprisingly, the medical conditions treated at the in-patient wards in Dakar are the worst of the worst, with most of the simpler surgeries performed as out-patient procedures, or more likely, not at all.

Like the other wards, the women's room only contains 12 beds. Each small sector of four single beds has a low divider separating it from the next quadrant. The beds are simple and reasonably

clean, as are the entire surroundings. The room is quiet. Relatives are assisting many of the patients. Those patients who are post-op are lying in stoic silence, with blankets pulled over their heads. There does not appear to be any other medical technical support being provided.

The ones awaiting treatment have visibly severe conditions requiring immediate surgery. They are large tumors causing swelling of the throat or of other facial features. Most are cancerous. Dr. Diop lifts the blankets on a couple of the recovering surgery patients and explains their conditions. He does the same with several women awaiting surgery. Not a whimper is heard, since everyone there is well aware that they are among the lucky few to be admitted, regardless of their ultimate fate.

We move next to the children's ward. Here are the same types of cases, except the patients are much younger, ages 4-16. All are accompanied by family members. As in the women's ward, not a peep is heard. Dr. Diop stops by the bed of his "favorite patient," a little four-year-old boy with a hugely swollen cheek and neck. He is being spoon-fed gruel by his mother. Dr. Diop lovingly pats the frightened boy's head and quietly says that he will operate on his cancer the next day.

He then motions to the window, which is partly opened. I look outside to see a garbage-strewn landscape with open dumpsters. The garbage is being picked over by scavengers, both human and not. The stench is appalling. It is an obviously inappropriate and unsanitary condition to have outside the hospital, and I say so. Dr. Diop concurs. He tells me he has been complaining about it to the authorities for years, but that "it's like talking to a brick wall."

We go to the room across the hall. It is the cancer ward for men. All the patients are in dire circumstances. Abdoulaye takes a look, turns around and exits, while I put on a stiff upper lip. Dr. Diop lifts a loose bandage on the throat of an emaciated man to reveal a trachiotomy. It is the patient's second visit for surgery. As Dr. Diop explains, the surgeons do a good job removing the tumors, but they lack the follow-up radiology and chemotherapy treatments to complete the cures. Other patients there have hideously bulging eye sockets or missing noses. Dr. Diop lifts the blanket from one man just back from an operation, who pulls it right back before we can assess his condition. The doctor does not try again. No one complains. We leave.

Our final stop is at the outpatient clinic. There are four booths in close quarters equipped with what looks like dentists' chairs and some other medical paraphernalia. Three of them are in use. It is here that most of the ten thousand patients are operated on each year.

We return to Dr. Diop's office, where he shows us the architectural drawings for a new clinic at a hospital complex next to Dakar University across town. He says he wants it to be a "center of excellence" for the entire West African region. He tells us more about the doctors he is training from Mali, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissou, Burkina Faso, and other nearby countries. The drawings show a nice facility on paper, but there is nothing available yet to put inside, except for desperate patients and under-equipped doctors.

I am at a loss for words. Dr. Diop's quiet competence, integrity, and professionalism are inspiring, despite the overwhelming sense of inadequacy. My contacts and experience are not medical, but I feel compelled to suggest something I might do to help. Because one of his urgent

needs is to improve the opportunities for training of students and colleagues, it occurs to me that a high bandwidth Internet connection for telemedicine and various forms of educational material and training might be something worth pursuing. Clearly, he needs a lot more, and I promise to look into it. As we leave, he invites us for dinner the following Tuesday before my departure from Dakar.

* * *

My next visit is to see Dr. Moussa Fall, director of an energy NGO that also provides a lot of subsidized Internet services to other NGOs on a subsidized basis. We chat for a while and he has me meet a French colleague who is doing biodiversity studies. Dr. Fall is dressed in a white boubou and cap, an Islamic form of dress favored by many Senegalese men.

We go around the corner to a local restaurant run by a Cape Verde couple of Portuguese origin. Although there are Portuguese specialties on the menu, we order beef and fish dishes prepared Senegalese style. The cuisine in Senegal is reputed to be the best in Africa, apparently because of the heavy French influence. I get my fish, which is gutted but otherwise cooked whole and smothered with onions and a thin, reddish-hued sauce. Like other fish I get in subsequent meals, it appears to be of questionable origin and does not look very appetizing. But like the other fish I get afterwards, it is well prepared and very tasty. Dr. Fall and I talk about our work and families. He gives me his home number and tells me I should feel free to call him anytime. He insists on paying for lunch. We go outside to look for a taxi, stepping over and around several emaciated beggars lying in the street.

I return to the hotel and crash for a couple hours. I am still a bit jet lagged after my 24-hour trip earlier in the week, and the morning visit has been draining. After I resuscitate, I go to the hotel business center which has all business services, including both Mac and IBM computers and good Internet connections. I spend about an hour answering my high priority e-mails, a ritual I repeat every day during my stay.

I then go to find a car for a trip I am planning for the next day, a Saturday. There are Hertz and Budget offices, as well as other shops, in the large hotel atrium. The Budget car rental is considerably cheaper, but their selection is depleted because there is an international conference of about 250 notaries at the hotel. Unlike the common law system in the U.S. and British Commonwealth, the civil law system in the rest of the world confers a much higher set of responsibilities and status on notaries, who are essentially equivalent to lawyers and are used for the preparation of contracts and other formal legal documents. In short, they have enough money to travel to a fancy hotel in Senegal for a conference and to rent cars. I reserve a small Renault Clio and a guide. The guide costs 18 bucks and the car almost 140 (including km charges). In the U.S., the fees would be reversed.

That evening, the hotel restaurant has signs all over announcing that “Le Beaujolais Nouveau est arrivé!” This is the annual ritual of oenophile snobbery in which people throughout the world race to be the first to try the freshest Beaujolais bottling of the year. It is a pretentious practice hyped by the media and Beaujolais bottlers to sell a lot of mediocre wine at inflated prices. This foolishness has now hit Dakar. The hotel is charging \$9 a glass and \$40 a bottle.

It is at this point that the full emotional impact of my morning visit to Dr. Diop's wards surfaces. I dwell on the notion of how many medical supplies the hospital could have for the price of one Beaujolais bottle. I berate myself for not hugging the little boy with the grossly swollen face and the dark future. His image burns in my brain. My tears flow liberally with the wine. I resolve to help Dr. Diop when I return to the States.

* * *

The next morning is bright and sunny, unlike the previous day, which was somewhat chilly and overcast to match my mood. My guide, El Hadj Alioune Diene, arrives on time and we head out for an all-day excursion. Our first stop is Lac Rose, just east of the city. As its name implies, the lake's water has a pinkish hue resulting from a unique algal bloom that occurs primarily in the hot and rainy season.

On the way there, Alioune asks me to stop for a hitchhiker, who just happens to be his friend. This strikes me as prearranged and I wonder whether I am being set up for a robbery, or worse, but I decide to trust him. The hitchhiker turns out to be very pleasant and polite, like almost everyone else I meet in Senegal. He goes with us to Lac Rose, even though it's out of his way.

The road through Dakar is jammed with traffic. It is lined with vendors, large and small, and zillions of people are milling about. I would like to pay more attention to the sideline activities, but prudently focus on the vehicles around me. The traffic is actually reasonably orderly by troisième Monde standards and I am not particularly stressed out. In fact, I am much calmer being in control of my own vehicle than I have been as a passenger in the wrecks that have posed as taxis all week. Most of the vehicles on the road are minibuses, which are the predominant form of public transport. These contraptions are invariably packed to the hilt with human cargo and spew ungodly amounts of black diesel smoke out their sagging rear ends. They make frequent stops for passengers in random places, so I attempt to avoid them as much as possible.

Eventually we make a left turn off the main highway to go to Lac Rose. The sign says that the road is under construction, but this is the understatement of the millennium. I have immediate doubts about whether we should venture forth. It appears that the road is being widened from two to four lanes, but it is all mud, at least a foot deep. There are only some very tenuous tracks in a single lane on the opposite side of the road. I am puzzled by the mud, since it's currently the dry season and everything around is baked dry. My immediate concern is that we will encounter another vehicle and one of us will get mired in the muck. Actually, the deeply rutted lane looks bad enough to get stuck in just on our own, but my passengers are nonplussed. Not seeing any cars heading toward us, I decide to proceed with at least my trepidation intact. After a blessedly short span we emerge onto a surprisingly well groomed dirt road.

We go through a series of one-track hamlets which are dismally poor and appear to offer few amenities. They consist mostly of partially constructed gray cinder-block structures. They have walls, but generally lack windows, doors, roofs. Many are empty and appear to be uninhabited. It looks like it could be public housing under development, except that there is virtually no sign of any construction activity. It is all very surreal. The few completed houses are mostly commercial

or house some type of institution—a school, a mosque, a clinic. Despite the poverty, each enclave has a telephone center.

As I learn through my extensive conversations with my guide, with my host, Abdoulaye, and with other Senegalese I meet on this trip, these institutions are representative of the culture and character of the people, whom, unlike the French who have dominated them for several centuries, I have quickly grown to like. Senegal is a relatively small, mostly agrarian country, with a population of about 10 million that is growing quite rapidly. Like other countries, much of this nation's character is a result of its geography. It is located in the northwestern corner of the Sahel, or sub-Saharan Africa. Its relative proximity to the north African desert region makes it a crossroad between the Arabic and Islamic north and the black, animist south. Although the nation is 95% Moslem, it is by no means a fundamentalist culture. In my limited and admittedly favorably skewed experience, the people are almost universally friendly, open, tolerant, educated, enterprising, and worldly. This observation holds true from the top echelons to the lower ones, though not necessarily to the lowest, who unfortunately form the bulk of the populace.

By far the greatest geographic factor in Senegal's unfortunate history up to the present day, however, is the fact that it is the westernmost point in Africa, closest to the New World. This has been the source of the people's greatest misfortune—and perhaps their future salvation. Being the closest point in Africa to the Americas made it the port of choice for the slave trade, of, in consecutive order of shame, the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and French. Only the French endured as the colonial power following the abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century, and remain to this day the country's single most influential link to the developed world.

I am told that most people, certainly in the more urban areas, are literate and at least read some Arabic. There are 6 languages native to Senegal, the principal one being Wolof, which one might mistake for a language from Star Trek, but which seems to have an Arabic ring to it. Wolof is the language of commerce, but most educated Senegalese also speak good French. Many speak at least one other language, frequently English. This is borne out by my contact with people at all levels. For example, my guide speaks fluent French and passable English, which, he says, he has learned at home from a French-English book. I communicate almost exclusively in French throughout my trip, pleased to have the opportunity.

The Senegalese also are avid travelers, now happily on a voluntary basis. Everyone I meet seems to have friends or relations living in the U.S. or Europe. All from the upper classes have some higher education experience abroad, with kids there as well. Their international perspective also makes them a natural leader of francophone West Africa, and virtually every government official speaks in terms of regional goals and programs. I am guardedly optimistic about their future.

We arrive at Lac Rose midmorning. My goal is to drive around a little, take a few pictures, and hit the road again before the hordes of local vendors can encircle us. The lake is not as pink as it appears on post cards, supposedly because it's not the optimal time of year for that phenomenon, or perhaps because the color on the post cards is not quite authentic. I also am surprised to find out that it's a highly saline body of water that is harvested for salt, which is exported in great quantities. I take a few snapshots, but not before a few beggars and vendors bearing sand

paintings arrive. After some bargaining, I buy two small ones for the ludicrous equivalent of about two bucks apiece, and we make our escape.

After dropping our hitchhiker off, our next stop is over 100 km south on the Atlantic coast. The intervening countryside is quite flat, with the exception of the many impressive baobab trees dotting the boring landscape. We arrive at Joal, a large fishing town of Portuguese lineage, which has many wooden fishing boats littering the beach. The place is relatively nondescript, but I am drawn there because of the adjoining island village of Fadimuth, which is paved with sea shells and has a cemetery covered with them.

Fadimuth is one of the few Catholic enclaves in the whole country. Both the village and the cemetery, which is situated on yet another small island, are accessible only on foot over very long and rickety wooden bridges that span over a shallow bay. It is a very picturesque area, but the village stinks of animals, which prominently feature pigs and drying fish. I take a bunch of pictures, including a couple of Alioune, who wants me to send him copies when I return to the States.

On the way back to Dakar we stop at a very attractive coastal town called Saly. There are several fancy resorts and establishments catering mostly to Europeans. Many wealthy Senegalese have built villas there. We go for an al fresco lunch on the beach at a 4-star hotel called L'Espadon (The Swordfish). The meal begins with a complimentary serving of a house appetizer, raw sea urchin. It looks very exotic and inedible, but I squeeze some lime on it and it doesn't taste too bad, despite my misgivings. However, the mixed grill of fish that I order is not well prepared. My guide fares better. He suggests we lounge on the beach for awhile, no doubt so that he can ogle the topless French sunbathers. I don't resist.

We make our way back to Dakar in the waning daylight hours. We have talked all day in French about our respective countries, families, work, and the like. Alioune is a trained hotelier and has cooked at the hotel at which I am staying, as well as at a Korean and Japanese restaurant. He also tells me he worked on a cruise ship for a couple years, but left when he didn't get paid. His dream is to open his own restaurant in Dakar, or to get a job in the U.S. or France. He keeps trying to finagle an invitation from me to travel to the U.S., but I don't bite. There is heavy traffic as we approach the city and the exhaust pollution is intense. The trip has taken 11 hours and I am beat. Unfortunately, my boss arrives that night and wants to have breakfast the next day at 7:30 a.m.

* * *

The next two days are spent at the Afristech/Third World Academy of Sciences conference. The meeting is held in the very well equipped and beautifully appointed hotel auditorium. The entire complex was built by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia some 25 years earlier in some altruistic fit. Many regional dignitaries are present, as well as Ministers of Science and Technology from many of the world's developing countries.

My boss and I are two of the very few Caucasians in the bunch. I am reminded again of some Star Trek episode that features a gathering of exotic intergalactic ambassadors, all speaking unrecognizable languages. But I am brought back to Earth listening to their descriptions of the immense R&D and developmental challenges that they face.

The inescapable reality is that they have little chance of overcoming those challenges in the foreseeable future. I talk with many of them during the breaks, but it is quite clear that they too view me as a cash cow, much like the Dakarois on the street, but at a much higher level. Unlike most developing country bureaucrats at the ministerial level who are almost invariably corrupt, I imagine these men (not one of the top dogs is female) to be serious and earnest Ph.D.s with an important, but depressingly unrewarded, portfolio. Perhaps my assessment is naively generous, but it is at least a comforting delusion.

The first evening of the conference we are all invited for a reception hosted by the country's president at the Senegal White House in downtown Dakar. We are shuttled over in vans and minibuses. After waiting outside the residence for what seems like too long in the waning heat, we are ushered inside. I shake hands with the chief of state, an imposing figure some six-and-a-half feet tall, as I offer some inane French pleasantries.

I find a glass of champagne and a few hors d'oeuvres. The residence is very elegant, though not extravagant, and there are many beautiful objects d'art of diverse origins throughout the accessible portion of the ground floor. The food and drink are quickly devoured by the disadvantaged ministers and their coterie, so I spend most of my time in the rear courtyard talking with various honored guests.

I depart Dakar on a midnight flight the next evening after another day of depressing speeches by hopeless bureaucrats. I spend another long wait at the Salle d'Honneur, before boarding the Air France flight for Charles de Gaulle. We are fumigated like cockroaches by the Aryan stewardess as the plane takes off into the darkness.

* * *

As an aside, I have gone to Senegal three more times after the 1999 trip, through 2006. I always stayed at le Meridien and there has not been too much else of interest. One time, I went on a bus trip to Saint Louis, to see a local school and the big dam across the Senegal River (see <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/10546/scientific-data-for-decision-making-toward-sustainable-development-senegal-river-basin-case-study->, which is a report from a workshop I directed and co-edited on the largely negative effects of that dam on the ecology, socioeconomics, and politics of Senegal). We also hoped to go across the river into Mauritania to visit a state park there, but the park ranger that the Senegalese called said that we must be CIA agents and would not let us in. We did see a really cool iron bridge, built by Eiffel in the late 19th century and very reminiscent of his tower in Paris.

Another time, I was invited to speak to the annual meeting of their Academy of Sciences, which I did in French, and I met another President of Senegal, the successor of the one I met in 1999. I spoke about the need to have open access to publicly-funded information for development and the President then spoke for about 45 minutes about the development of ICT infrastructure in his country. Senegal is thus the only nation where I actually met two Presidents!

SOUTH AFRICA

**Notes from Tshwane
(and other places in the RSA)
2002 – Present
by
P.F. Uhler**

It is February 2008, and I have been invited to Pretoria to give a major presentation at the 1st African Data Curation Conference and to participate in a subsequent meeting of the CODATA Task Group on African Data Sources for Sustainable Development, for which I am an (unpaid) consultant. This is my fifth visit to Pretoria since 2002, which was renamed “Tshwane” as the original Zulu name in 2006, although it hasn’t quite caught on yet like the recent renaming of cities in India, China, and other de-colonized countries before that.

On previous trips, I also have gone to two other truly memorable places. On my first trip in 2002, I went with Bill Anderson, an American colleague, for a 2-day trip to Pilanesberg, a big game park, about two hours by car from Pretoria. That was great big fun, driving around in a safari jeep and seeing all the wild game. The hotel, with traditional thatched roofs, had really good food. Most of the meat was wild game harvested in the park and cooked different styles (including a kudu carpaccio, which of course I had to risk). I also had the second-best lamb there, which was roasted whole on a spit and truly great. That lamb was only surpassed by one I ate in Seville in 2000, the whole leg of which fit easily on my plate.

* * *

In 2005, I went down to Cape Town for three days, which was breathtaking. The Cape itself is one of the garden spots of the universe. The wine country north of the city is also beautiful and the wine is excellent. It is the Napa valley of RSA, but even more lovely.

The trip to Cape Town is after a meeting in Pretoria with two people who work for me in the office, Raed Sharif and Amy Franklin. It is purely a sightseeing foray. We stay at the marina in a refurbished prison built like an ersatz castle.

We rent an SUV at the airport, which I drive. I do stop at the red lights, although I am vigilant. We go up Table Mountain in the cable car on the first afternoon and hike around on top, taking in the views.

The next day we decide to drive around the Cape. We start by going to the Botanical Garden, which is beautiful, full of exotic flora. We then continue down the east side of the Cape and stop at the Boulders State Park, which is one of the few places outside Antarctica with a penguin colony. These are so-called jackass penguins, named that way because they bray. They are very diminutive and cute, and are not afraid of the plentiful tourists. The park is well-organized, with wooden pathways all over, and it’s a beautiful spot and a lot of fun.

We drive on down the coast to the tip—the Cape of Good Hope where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans supposedly meet. It is quite crowded, but peaceful nonetheless, having among the

cleanest and most rarefied atmosphere I have experienced in the world. We drive up the other side of the Cape, encountering wild monkeys and ostriches—which are very aggressive and attack the car if you slow down enough. We see deserted beaches and mountains, and small hamlets and upscale vacation homes. At sunset, we come to the outskirts of Cape Town and stop at a beach, with big boulders and a mountain range looming above.

On the last day, we drive up to the wine country, going through Franschook and Stellenbosch, stopping at some vineyards, and taking in the sights. The area is more beautiful than Napa valley and has really good wines. In the evenings, we find really good places to eat in the harbor. All-in-all a great trip!

* * *

Despite these very positive experiences, I have come to the conclusion that South Africa is a state of denial, ruled by white guilt and black incompetence, overlaid by brutal violence and extreme paranoia. There are many manifestations of this, some of which I describe below. Although I like to visit, I am in a constant state of nervous neurosis, if not outright fear like most of the people I meet here, because of the pervasive, hyper-violent crime.

This mood is reinforced by the sight of barbed wire and high security systems around every house and office building, and by the frequent horror stories and related statistics that are either told to me by my local colleagues or broadcast in the daily press. It is a beautiful country with an infrastructure that is still at a very high level and has good economic potential, largely due to its bountiful natural resources. The operative word here is “still.” One must hope and pray that South Africa does not go the route of Zimbabwe, but small and disquieting signs abound.

The most recent fiasco is the failure of the state energy company, Eskom, to keep up with the nation’s demands for electricity. There have been rolling blackouts throughout the country for over two months, usually lasting about three hours, which shut down everything in the affected area. Although this was forecast nine years earlier, Eskom failed to do anything about it. Quite the contrary, as my young but well informed white driver, Francois, tells me on the way from the airport.

Francois says that Eskom has gotten rid of all the previous white managers and replaced them with black ones in a post-apartheid effort to implement social equity in management. The company also cancelled its contracts with the previous (white-owned) coal suppliers, replacing them with underrepresented minority businesses. These suppliers lack the fleets of delivery vehicles to keep up with the demand. Worse, three of the seven existing power plants have been mothballed, apparently due to a lack of maintenance and repair, which has rendered those three plants useless. The company also sells a substantial amount of its power “reserves” to neighboring countries. It is not clear whether those contracts will be renegotiated, since one may assume there are substantial kickbacks involved, but Francois tells me that Eskom has officially estimated that the problem will persist for several years.

Eskom blames the onset of the problem on “wet” coal, due to heavy spring rains. It has appealed for voluntary electricity conservation of 10%, and although this target has already been met, it

apparently is not enough. Although I do not experience any of the outages during the day-time, one lengthy one apparently comes to an end of my stay just before I get to my hotel and the electricity goes out again twice that night. The disruptions are expected to cause significant economic damage. At the height of the problem in January, when the mines closed for two days, the mines alone were losing 100 million Rand per day (about US\$13 million, at the exchange rate du jour). Apparently, if left unfixed, the municipal water purification systems will lose their ability to keep the water safe from *e coli* and other contaminants within a few more months.

My hotel, the Casa Toscana, is rated 4 stars, which are well deserved. It is very upscale, with attractive architecture, large and comfortable rooms, and a beautiful garden. It also fortunately has a very good restaurant, marred only by the randomly erratic service of the waiters, who are all black and apparently in training.

In light of the electrical problems, but more important because of the severe crime problem and the generally uninteresting nature of Tshwane, I decide to stay at the hotel and relax and work. I have about two-and-a-half days before the conference. I spend my time lounging in the garden and writing my presentation. It is called *Information Gulags, Intellectual Straightjackets, and Memory Holes*. Because of the amount of time I have, I end up writing a draft article, which I rather like (and which was subsequently published as an essay in 2011 in the CODATA Data Science Journal). The presentation is mildly provocative, but I get a lot of compliments subsequently at the meeting.

The only time I venture out is Saturday evening. I go to the local mall to get an electrical adapter for my laptop, do some browsing, and get a different meal since I know I will otherwise be eating at the hotel for several days. Menlyn mall is actually very fancy, nicer than most in the U.S. I have been there on two previous occasions, so I know my way around. There are several good restaurants on the top floor and this time I go to Cappucino, a restaurant recommended by Francois. It turns out to be quite good and a full meal costs about US\$20. I am on edge about the power situation and also finding a cab to take me back to the hotel, which is just five minutes away. Nothing adverse happens, but I do not go out alone again for the rest of my stay.

* * *

I go to Cape Town again in 2010 for my sixth trip to the “beloved country”. It too is most memorable, mostly because I have been named the 2010 winner of the international CODATA Prize. They are paying for me to attend the biennial CODATA conference, give an acceptance speech, and stay at the Spier winery in the Stellenbosch valley for a week. Tough duty.

[to be continued]

SOUTHERN AFRICA

Notes from Southern Africa – Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana

October – November 2018

I have wanted to go to Namibia for a long time. The Kalahari desert, the Skeleton Coast, Windhoek, the remoteness of the land—were all exotically conspiratorial. Similarly, I have wanted to see Victoria Falls: the largest waterfalls in the world. I have been to Iguazu in Brazil and Niagara on the US-Canadian border, and they are majestic in their own right, but they are not Victoria Falls. When I found out that I would be invited to a conference and meetings in Botswana, I knew it was my chance to go to these places and see what they were like.

Day 1 – Windhoek, the Boring Capital

After a very long, but uneventful flight from New York to Johannesburg and another short flight a few hours later, I am in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. En route, I find out that they drive on the left side of the road, à la the Brits (and South Africa, no doubt), rather than on the right, as one would expect from a former German colony.

I have rented a standard shift, which is the default in this neck of the woods. In fact, it's the default anywhere outside North America. It's hard enough to navigate the vehicle driving on the "wrong" side of the road, without having to worry about the stick shift with the "wrong" hand, and a healthy dose of jet lag. No such luck. The guy at the Avis counter says he has just an Audi, which would be a lot pricier than my economy VW Polo, but that would not be allowed on unpaved roads. I know I will encounter some in the desert (see below), so I have to decline and tough it out.

After leaving ignominiously from the airport, I go to find my Hilton hotel. Another problem I encounter is that my Pixel 2 cell phone service, though very cheap through Google, does not service Namibia, so my GPS doesn't work either. Fortunately, the roads and signs are very good, and the stick shift on the left poses no problem, so I make it in one piece.

The hotel is very nice and there's an infinity lap pool on the roof. Windhoek itself is quite upscale, safe...and boring. The only thing worth noting is the dinner. I go online to find the best places, one of which is the Stellenbosch Wine Bar and Bistro, a mere 5 minutes by taxi from the hotel. I get to the complex which is very upscale and busy. There's a big courtyard where people eat al fresco, which is ringed by nice shops and indoor restaurant seating.

I ask the restaurant maitre'd for a table and he tells me they are fully booked. It is full, but it is also very big, so I take it with some skepticism and accompanying protestations, but he points me to the tasting room on the other side. It is your usual bistro fare, but very sophisticated and lots of Stellenbosch wines by the glass to choose from.

Although the large place is full, it's almost entirely white people in a predominantly black country. There is a smattering of black patrons, but the only blacks in large numbers are the servers. It is a racist legacy, without the overt racism of neighboring South Africa. I believe it's

because the economy is better (for instance, I don't see any slums) and more egalitarian, so there is less resentment and violence. In any case, it is a really good meal and I resolve to go there again on my way back.

Days 2 and 3 – The Trans Kalahari Highway and Swakopmund on the Skeleton Coast

I get up quite early and set out for Swakopmund in my standard shift car, driving on the wrong side of the road, in a big city with a lot of traffic—and without a map. Hey, no problem. I have some rudimentary directions that I seem to have misplaced but remember some of the major ones. I decide to follow the sun and go on Robert Mugabe Drive ;-)

After about an hour of being lost, going the wrong way on the Drive, I find my way out of town and set out on the highway. The road is pretty good, but there is a fair amount of construction. Fortunately, there isn't much traffic and when there is no construction, one can go at least 140km/hour, which is 20 km over the posted limit. Most cars pass me. It's not that my VW doesn't have a lot of zip, but it is a foreign country and I am not yet oriented. There are traffic cameras in the city, according to warning signs, but it appears to be a free-for-all in the hinterlands—and they are hinterlands.

I follow the signs on the B2 highway going north to the town whose name I remember. I then go west on B1 for the rest of the way to Swakopmund. The road narrows, but it is still good and well-paved, and the speed remains posted at 120km. I now go about 150km/hour. There is a radar speed trap in one place, but fortunately I am only going about 135km/hour and they don't stop me. Whew.

The scenery looks like the American Southwest—a combination of southern New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada. There is a lot of brush and dry grass for about the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of the 3-hour trip, with a mostly flat landscape or mildly rolling hills, but rock formations and some mountains in the distance. The temperature increases from the mid-20sC in the morning in Windhoek to almost 40C, where it gets very desertish in the final 100km.

I stop for lunch in some small town and eat chicken and an ice cream bar at a convenience store in a gas station. The town has a regional secondary school with several buildings and the children, who are out for or at lunchtime, all wear uniforms. There is no rowdiness.

I get back on the road and flip through some stations on the radio. I pick one that's very eclectic by U.S. standards. It is mostly music, both contemporary pop and hip hop, but it is interspersed with all kinds of reports. The station's byline, which was repeated frequently, was "if you're going to sleep on Friday night, this station is not for you." But the regional reports seemed rather bookish: African infrastructure advances; the stock market in Harare, Zimbabwe is unpredictable and risky (surprise surprise); African women can lead the region; a violent gang cleans up part of the river in Nairobi and apparently reforms itself. There are some world news briefs from literally every continent. I think they are trying to be geographically egalitarian.

Most bizarre (and definitely not of the Friday-night-on-the-town variety) is a college-level lesson on how to use scholarly sources and determine whether they are appropriate. The announcer refers to a chapter in a textbook, which you are supposed to have open, before you. The example

used is the Weimar Republic post-1923 and the question to be answered is whether the economy ever improved from that date, until its collapse. There were pro and con sources and instructions on how to use them. For someone with a history degree, I found the lesson on the radio to be fascinating.

I also made a small detour to a mining town in the desert (again, no slums) and then went on a short ride to a uranium mine. I got to the mine entrance, but there was a gate and a guard, so I didn't try to go in and turned around. There were a lot of mines of various kinds in the desert area, similar to South Africa and no doubt providing a lot of employment.

I got to Swakopmund in the mid-afternoon and didn't even get lost going to my hotel. It was very nice and had a casino next to it. I went to the town to do some exploring, use the ATM, check-in with the private air company for my sightseeing flight along the Skeleton Coast the next day, and down to the Atlantic shore to find restaurants (the best ones are always overlooking the sea).

The coast is very upscale, catering to white South Africans and Europeans (I heard German, French, Italian, and British English). I saw some Japanese as well, though no Chinese—yet. There were lots of hotels and restaurants, along with nice apartments and villas. A palm-lined boulevard and a wooden jetty graced to seashore. I found what looked like a really good seafood place, built inside an old steamer, that had a great menu and wine list. I then had a glass of bubbly at another restaurant at the end of the pier. Later that evening, I returned to the ship restaurant and had a fabulous meal—all for under \$50, including a hefty tip.

Unfortunately, the next day was no quite so bucolic. I had a colonoscopy almost two weeks earlier in upstate NY and I woke up to some, ahem, complications. This freaked me out, including the thought of getting sepsis in the Namib desert or Zimbabwe or Botswana. Certainly, the first two did not sound appealing at all. I also was unable to access my medical email, for some reason (and nowhere in Namibia), so I had to do it through Alex. And of course, it was the very beginning of the weekend.

I did not feel bad otherwise, at least, so I slept in. I was to take a sightseeing flight after 13:00 so I got ready for that, only to find out that both other parties who rented the plane cancelled. I could not afford to pay about \$1500 for a two-hour ride by myself, so I didn't go. Bummer, all around.

Instead, I took it easy that afternoon and went to a museum of crystals and Namibian jewelry down the street for about an hour, which was mildly interesting. I then went to the seafood restaurant for a reprise.

Day 4 – Crossing the Kalahari Desert without a map to the Neuras Ranch and Winery, Sossusvlei

The next morning I wasn't dead, so I figured I would not get very sick very fast. I had some Doxycycline, which works against malaria and that I was going to take for the Victoria Falls portion of the trip. Even though this antibiotic is not one used for sepsis, I figured it could do some good and I began to take it a few days early.

I left Swakopmund for Walvis Bay, which was a nice drive along the coast going south for about ½ hour. I then went inland to cross the desert. It was a bitch. Not only did the scenery get sparse, but the highway became a dusty gravel road. There were times I drove about 30km/hr on the washboard surface. What if I got sick, I thought? What if I got a flat tire in the heat? What if it took all day for me to drive? I was not a happy camper.

After about 1.5 hours of this, the scenery and even the road started to improve, as did my mood. I took some pictures and drove faster. Once over the Kalahari basin, the landscape became more interesting and I took some photos along the way. I made it all the way to a very small town—a rest stop really—called Solitaire. It took about 4 hours.

I had some printed instructions on how to find Neuras that someone there had sent me, so I hoped it was accurate. There were no distances or approximate times to travel, and I did not have a map or GPS to consult. However, the directions were accurate and the signs were good, so 1.5 hours later I was at the Neuras compound, again out in nowhere, Namibia.

Neuras is a small vineyard and a large nature preserve. They grow only red wine grapes and produce 1,500 bottles/year. They are one of four wine producers in Namibia, although they also make brandy and rum. Neuras is blessed with having 5 natural springs right on the compound, so they have enough water for growing the grapes and taking care of the visitors.

There are a lot of buildings that make up the complex. Some are for producing and storing the wine. Others are for housing the guests and still others for administrative purposes. Surrounding the structures are the grapes and fruit trees and some domesticated animals.

The property is 4,500 hectares and is surrounded by mountains and hills. The wild animals stay in the basin and the owners recently partnered with an African foundation to establish a wildlife refuge. The grounds are very attractive, but as I said, remote.

I took a tour of the vineyard, which ended with a small wine tasting and a nice cheese board with the proper accoutrements. I then went for a “sunset drive” to a nearby outcropping called “Honey Canyon” (neither honey nor canyon were there however). Since it was partly cloudy, there was a beautiful sunset over the mountains, so it was well worth the excursion.

Upon returning, there was a dinner on the patio, which consisted of a very good butternut squash soup, a decent chicken breast in a cream sauce (with couscous and candied carrots), and a so-so fruit and ice cream dessert. There was copious wine as well as the tasting of the aforementioned rum and brandy, which unfortunately were mediocre.

Day 5 – Le Mirage, Sesriem, Sossusvlei

I got up early and still didn't feel sick. After breakfast, I went to a cheetah feeding and then set off for Sesriem. The cheetah interlude bears some comment. We took a jeep, similar to the ones used in the South African game parks, for about a ten-minute ride through the countryside. The cheetahs—there are seven of them—are in a 350-hectare enclosure with an electrified fence. These animals are “rescued” and considered “domesticated”, so they can't be released anymore

in the wild. They are fed a big chunk of zebra meat every day, whether there are tourists to onlook, or not.

We get up to the stand from which the cheetahs are fed and much to my surprise, the stand is only about 1m high and has just 3 metal bars ringing the circumference, which are completely porous and could easily be bridged by the animals. We are soon surrounded by the seven hungry cheetahs, which are hissing and growling while my guide cheerily goes on about the statistics. I fancy myself providing the cheetah breakfast if she does not hurry up.

After an interminable interlude, she throws the big chunks of meat to all the hungry creatures and they take them off to devour them in private. One cheetah comes back very soon and he is rewarded with an extra portion, which I assume was prepared for that eventuality. The other animals are sated and only a few return, although lackadaisically. I too am bored at this point and we leave.

After saying my goodbyes at the compound, I set off for another gravel road slugfest to my next destination, Le Mirage Resort and Spa. The 1.5-hour trip takes an extra hour because of the atrocious road conditions. It is taking a lot of fortitude and concentration, while assiduously trying my best to disregard the immediate assaults. I am worried especially about the car and the tires, which are taking a constant beating. Poor baby.

I get to Le Mirage around two in the afternoon and it does not disappoint. It's several castle structures in the sand and I only wish I could have stayed there for two nights (but not at the expense of Neuras). After a late lunch, it is too late to go to the state park and dunes, so I plan to do that early the next morning on my way back to Windhoek. I use the rest of the afternoon to relax, get caught up on my emails, and take pictures of this extremely photogenetic place. See my photos [here](#).

I have a gin and tonic at a terrace constructed expressly for watching the sunset and then have a good prix fixe 5-course dinner in a castle out in the middle of nowhere.

Day 6 – Windhoek again, by way of Sossusvlei

The next morning, bright and early, I go for my long trip back to Windhoek, via an extensive detour to the canyon and dunes in the state park. It is truly majestic and an out-of-this-world experience. In fact, it looks like Mars, the red planet.

The road to Sossusvlei is paved, thank god, but curiously the speed limit posted is just 60km/hr. It must be because people stop to take pictures, but I disregard it assiduously since I have a very long day of driving ahead of me and I want to get this over with. Moreover, there must be no cameras out in nowhere although I do not know about the state of the police force or deputized park rangers there. Fortunately, I do not encounter any.

I drive to the end of the road, which stops at a state park. One needs to take a shuttle from there inside the park and I have neither cash nor time, so I do a quick once-over and head back.

By the road I spot a huge red sand dune and a lot of people hiking on its spine, so I stop to take some pictures. It is the famous “Dune 45”, which they have t-shirts and books about in the vicinity, so I spend some time there and head back.

Once out of the park, I decide to fill the gas tank, since you never know around there. I converse with an affable gas station attendant, who is intrigued about my New York provenance, when another attendant comes by and tells him that he is pumping diesel into my petrol tank. Needless to say, this causes immediate headaches and I have to get the diesel fuel pumped out and replaced with a full tank of petrol. The good news is that it is diesel in a gas engine, instead of vice versa, which apparently would be much worse.

There is a hotel nearby, which has a full repair shop and big garage, so I am pulled by a truck and chain about a ½ km to it. It takes 4 guys over an hour to get the diesel out of the tank and they put in enough petrol to get me back to the gas station, where the guy who made the original mistake fills it up. I am not about to pay for the fuel, so I just drive off as soon as the tank is filled. This must have been expected, since no one tries to stop me, but I imagine it costs the attendant about a week’s pay. Good lesson.

I set out, via Solitaire again, and I get there after 1:00. I have a decent lunch, but I still have about four hours to go to Windhoek. The scenery is very nice, even if the road isn’t, and I retrace my earlier steps for only an hour or so. I encounter only one car every half hour. It is a gravel road all the way to Windhoek. It takes me 12 hours from the time I leave Le Mirage to the Windhoek Hilton, where I stay again. I go back for another fine meal at the Stellenbosch Wine Bar and call it a night.

Day 7—Game Lodge, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

The next day, I drive to the Windhoek airport and return my rental car, which remarkably is still in one piece. I fly to Victoria Falls on Halloween. No one is dressed up. Darn.

In any case, the trip is uneventful and the ride to the game lodge is smooth. It is an upscale place and probably costs the per capita Zimbabwe GDP for a night’s lodging. They have a watering hole below the hotel where animals congregate and a watering hole in the hotel from which to watch. Their restaurant is quite good. I order the warthog.

Days 8 and 9 – Victoria Hotel, Victoria Falls

The next morning, the airport taxi driver picks me up and takes me to a travel agency downtown where I can buy some excursions for my next two days in Vic Falls. I get vouchers for a short helicopter ride over the falls and a sunset cruise on the Zambezi above the falls for the first night and then a zipline at the bridge by the falls for the next morning and a nighttime game ride.

I enjoy the Victoria Falls Hotel, the grande dame of the area and the only place from which you can see the bridge from Zim to Zam (but not the falls themselves). The hotel décor and grounds are very opulent, even if the room isn’t, and it is befitting of the Queen’s memory. It’s another Zim GDP equivalent place.

I eat lunch al fresco and order the crocodile salad and some South African wine. It is hot, but not unbearable in the shade. It has been consistently in the 90s F in both Namibia and Zim, but it is a little hotter and a little more humid in the falls area. Nonetheless, it is still dry there and not as humid as one might expect.

Soon after the long lunch I am picked up for the helicopter ride. It's a big operation serving the tourists, with three choppers in operation. I am joined by two younger couples, one from Dusseldorf and one from Zurich, and we exchange pleasantries waiting for our heli.

We have chosen the shortest ride of the options—a 13-minute photo op. We then get some instructions and off we go. I am in the cockpit next to the pilot. I am buckled in and don't feel unsafe, but there is a large opening with nothing but air below me. The hole is big enough for yours truly. I take some pictures and a few short videos. The 13 minutes is plenty.

After we land, I go to the sunset excursion on the Zambezi. There is a traditional Zim drum band with a guy dancing energetically in native garb, which is sparse, but few pay any attention or give any tips. I'm sure that the boys in the band are disappointed.

We board the boat and set off. It is a small, two-deck ferry. It holds about 80 people and is almost full. There are a lot of Germans and South Africans and quite a few Zimbabweans. I don't discern any other Americans.

I sit down at a table with a couple from Zim. They are from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the man, Samuel, now owns a consulting service that supports the U.S. Embassy. It turns out that he was at the Zim embassy in DC when I was there. They speak very good English and are obviously well heeled. We exchange business cards and he tells me that he is coming to DC again soon for a month of training, so I tell him to send me an email before he comes. Who knows?

The cruise has some decent snacks and all you can drink, and the passengers take advantage of the latter. My Zim acquaintance pounds down Red Labels and soda and others on the boat have copious amounts of beer, wine, and booze. I am not that interested and have a couple of red wines, which are OK.

The ship's crew is very entertaining. We glide down the Zambezi and see some animals, including a lot of hippos in the water and an elephant and monkeys and birds on the banks. There is a nice sunset. Many pictures are taken. The crew passes a big jar around with is stuffed with cash. A good time is had by all.

I get back in time for my dinner reservation in the Livingstone Room (of "Mr. Livingstone, I presume" fame). It is the hotel's formal dining room. They have a nice a la carte menu and a 7-course tasting menu, which is too much food. They used to have a dress code of jacket and tie for the gentlemen, but gave that up some time before, no doubt because the guests didn't bring any business attire and complained. Now it's just no shorts, t-shirts, and flip flops. The food is very good, but it is accompanied by a bad pianist playing Frank Sinatra and Broadway classics.

The next morning, there is a large breakfast buffet near the pool, again al fresco. I talk to an old waiter named Phil, who likes the fact that I am from New York. I am supposed to do the zipline over the Zambezi by the bridge that morning, but the sun is hot and the walk to and from the bridge. The zipline itself is too much exposure for my antibiotic, so I reluctantly reconsider—and lose my \$45 fee. So, it goes.

I take it easy for a few hours and decide to have a high tea, a la the British since I am at the environmental crown jewel of their colonies, instead of lunch before the game drive. The tea is very nice; three tiers comprising the traditional finger sandwiches, scones and cream (not clotted, I'm afraid), and four petits fours all washed down with good Zim tea. About the same as The Ritz in London—and at a fraction of the cost.

I am picked up soon after that for my night game ride, which lasts about four hours, from 4 to 8. It's a large private reserve that is owned by a Saudi. The game driver is really good, navigating the very bad dirt roads and spotting the fleeting game in the bush. There are seven other tourists. We see some rhinos, a lot of buffaloes, and all sorts of other animals. We stop at a lake, which also serves as a barrier for the animals on one side of the preserve. We have a drink and take in the sunset. There are some rangers with rifles—the proverbial hired guns—who protect the animals, and especially the rhinos, from the poachers. We are told that no rhinos have been lost since the preserve was founded, I think about 15 years ago.

It is dark by the time the drive is finished and it has been a very pleasant excursion indeed. I am supposed to have a bush meat buffet dinner, but I opt to eat at the hotel instead. I have a meal there, al fresco again.

Days 10 – 18 – International Data Week, Gaborone, Botswana

I leave the Victoria Falls Hotel around 10 a.m. to go to the airport. I had a great and relaxing time in Vic Falls. The local people were really nice and the service in both places was impeccable. Of course, one would expect that at the two top places there, but all the people I encountered there were genuinely friendly. And I tipped well.

I take a short flight to Gaborone (pronounced “Khaboronie”, I find out) and onboard already run into three Chinese colleagues I know from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. As I said at the beginning of this travelogue, I am going there for a bunch of meetings and a conference.

I won't bore you with too many details, but a few highlights may be interesting. On Sunday, I lead a CODATA Data Policy Committee (DPC) meeting, which is more successful than I expect, with good participation (reps from China, Korea, India, England Scotland, Finland, Kenya, and the CODATA Executive Director, a British native living in Paris and getting a French citizenship in the face of Brexit). We have a lot going on—a Center of Excellence for Data Policy that is being established at the University of Arizona in Tucson; a CODATA workshop and conference on data policy and management in Beijing in September 2019; a 20-year review of an intergovernmental Global Biodiversity Information Facility over the 2019 year, for which I am lead consultant; and assorted issues of the DPC such as “data diplomacy”, data integrity and the

ethics of open science, and the relationship between upstream, non-profit data with downstream, commercial data applications.

The International Data Week (IDW) started on Monday morning, with the President of Botswana and other research luminaries giving a speech. There also were over 800 registrants, which far surpassed expectations, so already it was a success, but the subsequent conference sessions were interesting and well-attended.

For my part, I organized and chaired two sessions, and spoke at a third, all on Wednesday. My presentation was at a session on Access and Benefit Sharing for genomic data under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The title of my talk was “Everything’s a Database”, now that humans have shown that they can recreate and create everything, including all life forms from the digital to the physical, and play god. This is a really big deal, perhaps the most far-reaching technological advance to date, but most people are only now becoming dimly aware of it, if at all. Just wait.

I also am a member of the Technical Advisory Board (TAB) of the Research Data Alliance, one of the main groups organizing this event. One of our functions is to serve as liaison to various working groups and participate in their sessions at the conferences. I was also asked to serve as co-chair of the TAB, a decision I need to make soon after the conference.

The meetings ended with a 2-day CODATA General Assembly and Executive Committee meeting, in which I participated as an ex officio member because I’m chair of the CODATA Data Policy Committee. All in all, a very busy and successful set of business meetings throughout the week.

As to Gaborone itself, it was fairly unremarkable. I stayed at the best hotel in town, which was very pleasant and well-appointed, and right next to the conference center, so it was very convenient. Botswana is perhaps the most economically successful and certainly one of the most peaceful sub-Saharan African countries and the Gaborone infrastructure is built up and modern. It is also very vanilla, with little of interest. The weather was mostly perfect, however, and many of us had a drink by the pool in the evenings. The food and drink were good, but not great.

The only thing I did that was interesting, apart from all the substantive activities in the meetings, was go to another private game preserve on the morning of the last day in Gaborone. I went with two colleagues from Taipei and one from New Delhi. We saw more wild animals, including a short trek into the bush where we luckily came upon a rhino and her 4-month old calf. This, while all the RINOs retired or were voted out back in the USA.

I leave Botswana uneventfully for my long trip back via Johannesburg but manage to sleep 10 hours (!) on the plane with the aid of a sleeping pill. I will be getting my Chinese visa as soon as I arrive, since I will be going to Beijing and Tengchong in Yunnan Province in SW China (by way of Kunming and Dali) for more meetings in two weeks. After that, I will visit Myanmar for five days of personal travel. I will probably write up my experiences in SW China and Myanmar.

SWITZERLAND

Notes from CERN and Switzerland
1994 to the Present
by
P.F. Uhler

I arrive on Thursday morning in Zurich, the Swiss banking capital. I have gotten about three hours of sleep on the red eye from Washington. There are ten free-of-charge internet terminals by my gate, but they are all being used and I don't have time to wait before I catch my connecting flight to Geneva. I watch a little CNN instead, which is fixated on the crisis du jour, the assassination of the Prime Minister of Armenia and several MPs in Yerevan. I fly on to Geneva in the dense fog.

Switzerland is the country that keeps other peoples' money, produces fancy chocolates and time pieces, and runs world-class ski resorts. It is a playground of the world's rich. While Zurich is the banking center where dictators, mafiosos, and assorted tycoons entrust their corrupt money in secret accounts, Geneva is the place where many U.N. and other international organizations are headquartered. Their *schtick* is to appear as uncorrupted and uncorruptable as possible, while giving loads of money to less developed countries, which is then recycled back to Zurich. Zurich is German, buttoned down, and oriented toward the private sector; Geneva is French, somewhat less stuck up, and run by and for the public sector. My business is in Geneva.

After a long shower and many cafes express, I go to my first meeting at UNCTAD at the Palais des Nations. I am met by three savvy and cynical bureaucrats from Afghanistan, Syria, and Venezuela, each one fortunate to have escaped his homeland at some lucky point in the past. They listen politely to my *spiel*. I am trying to get them to pay a substantial amount of money for a study regarding the various conditions for the successful transfer of scientific information to and within developing countries. I want to get a committee of world-class experts together in Washington and to hold meetings in Asia, Africa, and South America. Such a study will take a couple of years and cost maybe a million bucks. After some discussion, they profess their interest and tell me they might be willing to host a workshop in Geneva. Not bad for starters (although this project subsequently never gets going, in any case).

I go back to the hotel near the airport and then to a restaurant that is in the midst of a "Moroccan week". A quartet of seemingly authentic, indigenous musicians, dressed in *fezes*, pointy silk white slippers, and other Moroccan garb plays music from the Casbah. I am entranced. It's not clear whether it is the music, the belly dancer, the expensive wine, or the jet lag, but who cares? After the food and entertainment, I leave for my room and sleep for 11 hours.

* * *

The next day I drive my little rented Mercedes a short way to CERN, which is the world's factory for Nobel laureates in physics. These people are intellectual supernovas who get \$1M prizes for colliding invisible particles with other invisible particles to substantiate elegant theories. As a physicist at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab once told me, a theorist has but two fates: the noble one is that the theories are disproved; the more common one is that they

are merely forgotten. However, he forgot the Nobel fate of the CERN crowd, where the theories are seemingly proven—at least as proven as they can be in this ephemeral pursuit—and for long enough to earn the big prize.

The most visible aspect of this work, apart from their vast and exorbitant research playground, is their egos, which perhaps are eclipsed only by the hubris of the bankers in Zurich. It is a cluster of such stars who have invited yours truly to their international shindig—seven Nobel laureates and one Nobel wannabe, Prof. Antonio Zichichi, who has passed his prime but who at least can still claim to have the biggest and most visible ego of them all.

Prof. Zichichi is the mastermind and driving force behind a different noble and noteworthy effort, the International Center for Scientific Culture—World Laboratory. The idea for the ICSC—World Laboratory was hatched by Zichichi and two other Nobelists in physics, Paul Dirac and Piotr Kapitza, in 1982. The Center was founded in 1986. Nominally headquartered in Lausanne, this group promotes “East-West and North-South technical and scientific cooperation for research without secrecy and without frontiers.” Its goal is to carry out projects in scientific, technological, and medical fields, particularly for the benefit of developing countries, using a minimum of centralized bureaucracy and small amounts of seed money to initiate those projects.

Only two major gatherings are held each year. One is in Erice, a very old town on a mountaintop in Sicily. Erice was founded by the Trojans in the 4th century B.C., essentially as a divine whorehouse. I’m not sure whether they thought the women or the house was divine, but whatever it was it was a pretext nonetheless. The Romans later took it over and wholesaled it, apparently sexually enslaving several thousand young women for decades. The town’s racy past has since metamorphosed into a center for scientific studies, cloistered in medieval palaces on cobblestone streets and belying the horrors of its history.

For the past quarter century, the Erice meeting every August has brought together over 100 scientists, technologists, and research policy types from all corners of the world to monitor and ameliorate 15 “planetary emergencies” in environmental, health, and other major social problems. The problems are identified and interdisciplinary scientific solutions are proposed for addressing them. I have attended two of these meetings, in 1999 and 2000. (As an aside, at the 2000 meeting I was approached by a Russian from the Ministry of Information, who wanted to hold negotiations with the U.S. on a cyber-warfare treaty. I told him that I was not in the U.S. government and that he would need to contact our State Department, but that conversation proved to be portentous.)

The other meeting takes place every October in CERN. Unlike the Erice meeting, which is run more as a discussion forum for sustained examination of difficult problems, the meeting at CERN is focused on reviewing and funding specific project proposals.

We hear short presentations about past and future projects, and they all appear to be worthy of support. I recall one from Peru, where it was found that holding prematurely born babies close to the mother’s bosom, in the absence of access to hospital incubators, increased the babies survival rates.

That evening, we all go to the CERN cafeteria and get somewhat boisterous. One participant from Sweden recounts a disgusting anecdote about a Chinese practice of cannibalizing aborted fetuses. It is actually the second time I have heard that story from the same guy, the first time in Erice a few months earlier. It sounds apocryphal, but he tells it with obvious relish.

* * *

In the morning, I drive to Chamonix, which is in the French Alps about an hour from Geneva. It is a crisp, early November morning and there has been a powdering of snow overnight on top of the brightly colored foliage in the mountains. I drive in the valley with the fog lifting to reveal the sun and a clear blue sky. The scenery is breathtaking.

I go to the town, which itself is truly charming. I decide to go to Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps and just outside Chamonix. I take the cable car to the top, over 15,000 feet. The views are stunning and I am glad I went. I resolve to ski in Chamonix—a decision I fulfill almost 18 years later.

I drive back to Geneva that afternoon and take the plane back to D.C. the next morning.

TAHITI

Tahiti et Ses Toasts
July 2012
by
Paul F. Uhler

I begin my trip to Tahiti in Montevideo, Uruguay, where I have been invited to participate in a workshop that's promoting open licensing of educational materials in that country. I have learned that the government of Uruguay is giving all K-12 students a small free laptop. Very interesting.

The itinerary to Tahiti is very long and convoluted. You would think that the trip would be quite simple, flying perhaps to Santiago de Chile (see my Chilean travelog) and then straight across the Pacific to Tahiti. Such a trip would take around 10 hours. But no. Because two different organizations in two different countries are paying separately for the travel to Uruguay and Tahiti, I have to go back to Washington, DC first and then go to the South Pacific.

I embark on my 35-hour journey from Montevideo via Garhulos in Sao Paulo and JFK in New York, down to National Airport in Washington DC, where I spend a few hours to wash up and change, and then fly from IAD to LAX and on to Papeete. Just a hop, skip, and a jump. At least the frequent flyer miles are good!

Fortunately, I have no mishaps along the way, such as missed connections or lost luggage, and I land safely at the Papeete International Airport two days after leaving Montevideo. The first thing I notice as we taxi down the runway is that the ocean laps up to the airport grounds with about 2 feet to spare. I imagine that there must be flooding whenever there is a big storm, but I am sure that the airport will have to be protected or removed in the not-too-distant future as the sea level rises.

This wonder of French engineering reminds me of a lot of technological designs one comes across in France that exalt style or aesthetics over practicalities. Beautiful to look at and be in, but flawed along the edges. (I am particularly concerned about the balsam wood walls in Terminal E at CGD, which poses a golden opportunity for any two-bit terrorist.)

I arrive in the Tahitian morning and after a fair amount of bureaucratic delay (another French specialty) that I am in no mood to suffer, I take a hideously expensive taxi a couple of km to my hotel (\$20 for 3 km). I arrive at the Hilton too soon to get a room, so I have to schlep around after my long trip, changing in the public bathroom, not having an internet connection, credit card problems without skype, etc. I endure this unhappy state of affairs until about 4:00 in the afternoon, being constantly rebuffed at the front desk by the surly French staff. I surmise that they are inhospitable primarily because the rigid check-in time is at least 3:00 and I am an American male instead of some French young hottie. My mood sours as the day progresses and I am finally allowed to go to my room, which is not much better than a cheapo motel in the U.S.

Dinner time arrives quite soon and I figure that the food at least, being of French and Polynesian pedigree, will have to lift up my spirits. I go to the dining room, which is built on stilts over the

ocean (another accident waiting to happen), which is half al fresco with a thatched roof and nice ambience.

I assume that the seafood from the pristine ocean must be a good option, along with a dry French white, but the cooking is more Americanese and Hiltonesque than français. More important, I notice that the waiting staff is primarily transvestite or transsexual or somewhere in-between, and is of the heavy-set Polynesian variety. Fatsos with five o'clock shadows wearing make-up and jewelry. Très dégoutante; I mean, débutante.

* * *

The next day is the meeting to which I have been invited to speak. It deals with intellectual property issues in the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity, with a focus on the South Sea Islands. I have done some writing in this general area and it is not my area of expertise, but hey, it got me a ticket to Tahiti.

After suffering jet-lagged in the meeting room most of the day, I join a group that has decided to go to downtown Papeete for an early dinner. It is some Belgian chain that brews its own beer, which sounds very promising. However, like everything else here, the beer turns out not to be very good and is very expensive. The food is the same. By now, I am completely soured on my sojourn to paradise and I go to bed soon after I get back. It can't get any worse, can it?

* * *

Well, fortunately it does not. In the conversation the previous evening, I also agreed to take a ferry the next morning to the nearest island, Moorea. The plane back to the U.S. is not scheduled to leave until later that night, so I have the whole day to play.

I meet my party of 5 at 8:00 a.m. to board the ferry, which is a rather large ship. It is another perfect day in this putative paradise, at least as measured by the atmospherics. We take a very pleasant cruise to Moorea, which takes just 50 minutes.

There is some confusion about our travel arrangements on the other side, but we soon get that sorted out. We buy some picnic lunch provisions and set out in a van cum guide on a circumference tour of the small island.

Moorea is quite attractive. It is hilly and forested, interspersed with upscale residences and the more basic accommodations of the natives (both Polynesian and white).

The main attraction, apart from the bucolic sightseeing, is a sojourn from a resort on a small boat to snorkel on a nearby reef. It is very warm and pleasant, with only the sun to worry about—or so I think.

We arrive at a very small island on the reef and don our snorkel gear. There are actually two small islands there with a channel in-between that has swift-moving water. Our guide tells us to

join him in a shallow part of the channel. He is an aging American hippie, very gaunt with long hair, apparently eking out a living in a tropical hideaway.

He is soon accompanied by three manta rays, which flap their fins to stay in place against the current. He forms a fist and extends his arm under the water's surface, directly into the gullet of a ray. His arm goes into the ray's mouth, almost up to his elbow. He asks us if we want to do the same and one by one we do. It is a bizarre experience with the ray whisperer.

After about 15 minutes we begin to snorkel in the channel. The water is clear and only 3-5 meters deep. It is lined on the bottom with coral reef, and various colorful vegetation and tropical fish. If you swim aggressively against the current, you can make some progress. Otherwise you need to use your flippers to stay in place, like the manta rays, or stop and let the current sweep you along. It is a lot of fun.

Unfortunately, I brush my knee against the coral in a shallow place and although I don't think it's a big deal at first, it continues to bleed when I get out. One of the people in our small group is a marine biologist and he tells me that I need to take this seriously. He has seen people in other parts of the world get cut by coral and he says that if left untreated, your leg can quickly get infected and swell to about twice its normal size. I have visions of being carried off the airplane in the U.S., delirious and on a stretcher.

Having put the fear of God in me, I first go to the bathroom when we return to the resort and clean the wound with water and soap. I then get some rubbing alcohol and some antibiotic cream and gauze from the front desk, which they have in supply for such common occurrences. With my wound well dressed, we continue to go around the island in our van and I hope for the best.

That afternoon we stop at a fancy resort—a Hyatt I believe—and walk around the premises. It is very nice, but very isolated, so you had better be prepared to stay put and like the exclusion if you go there. We also stop at an agricultural station, which does research on local crops and plants. It is mildly interesting, but I would go stir crazy there in a couple of days.

In the late afternoon we go through the only town on the island, which has quite a number of villas and other hotels. It is hilly and charming. We board the ferry in a strong wind as the sun sets. After another al fresco dinner at the Hilton, I make my way back to the airport for the long trip home via the City of Angels. There is no need for a stretcher upon my return.

TUNISIA

Notes from Tunisia
November 2005
by
P.F. Uhler

I arrive in Tunis via Paris on late Thursday morning. I am in Tunisia for the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), another U.N. global meeting that pits the USA against the world.

I come two days early so that I can see as much of the country as I can in case I never return, which I deem likely. After the two days of zooming around Tunisia, however, I am pleased to change my mind somewhat as I realize there are many more things I would like to see here, even if I don't come back.

I am joined in my journey by Prof. Paul Berkman, who has a joint appointment from the Ohio State and Santa Barbara Universities, whom I first met at the 2004 CODATA Conference in Berlin and with whom I have been collaborating on various intellectual endeavors since then. He does not arrive until later the first night, so after I get my rental car, a Renault Clio, I do some local recon to get oriented and see some of the sights before the WSIS begins.

The first thing one notices around Tunis is the very high level of infrastructure development. The constructed environment—the roads, buildings, etc.—are all of very high quality. This observation remains surprisingly constant as I travel throughout Tunisia.

The second inescapable aspect is the very high level of security. There are various uniformed and plainclothes police everywhere. They are at every major intersection in Tunis. They are at the gated entrance to the major hotels and inside as well. I initially chalk up the security concerns to the Summit preparations, since the meeting is a potential terrorist target.

Unfortunately, as I travel all over the country, I see police checkpoints at every small town and roundabout, and sense the pervasive aura of a police state. While providing some comfort regarding personal safety from crime and terrorism, it exudes the mentality and reality of a fascistic (or communist) regime. I have encountered such a security environment only a few times before, most vividly in Czechoslovakia in 1967, and less so in Senegal in recent years. China, that big communist bugaboo as seen in the U.S., does not even rate mention in this context, at least for the business traveler or casual tourist.

As I drive out of the airport in the general direction of the Corinthia Khamsa Hotel, I decide to look around the area to become locally oriented. I drive toward Carthage, which is between the WSIS Convention venue and the hotel in which I am staying. Carthage is now a ritzy suburb of Tunis, with a nice beach, some ruins and museums, and the presidential palace. After crisscrossing the area, I get my bearings and find the hotel. It is a five-star gated compound opposite another such compound. It has all the standard 5-star amenities, including a full health club with massages, nice restaurants, beautiful pools and a private beach. Unfortunately, it has

only one internet connection with a horribly slow bit rate. So much for the “Information Society”!

I have a very fine buffet lunch consistent with its 5-star billing. I then do a quick tour of the hotel grounds, and afterwards go out again and do some more sightseeing and errands. I return to some of the ruins and mosques that I saw coming in, in order to take a few pictures. I also gas up the car and buy bottled water for the coming trip, since I want to leave at daybreak for the very long drive.

That evening I go across the street to the other gated hotel, where I am forced to surrender my passport to get a visitor badge. The security goons are starting to piss me off. The place turns out to be even fancier than the one I am in. I go to a Tunisian restaurant there instead of the Italian one. I order a 6-type salad and a lemon chicken tajine, which is a sealed ceramic pot-au-feu. The tajine is very good and just as I imagine it should be. The meal is accompanied by some mineral water and mediocre Tunisian red wine.

* * *

Early Friday morning, I meet Paul Berkman at a sunrise breakfast and we set off on our two-day adventure. I have a rudimentary road map of the country that provides reasonably good coverage of the main roads. Fortunately, the signage on the roads is excellent, with all of the directions indicated at each of the ubiquitous roundabouts. Our attempt to get out of Tunis, however, is not as facile although it does provide us with an opportunity to see a lot of the city. The signs on the streets and boulevards in Tunis unfortunately are not as robust as on the main highways. We try to find our major route navigating by the sun, but it takes about 1.5 hours and an extended police stop to find our way.

The cop who pulls us over at an intersection appears to be interested in extracting some payola. He sees a couple of western tourists ripe for the picking. He gets my papers and goes to his booth to record the info. He appears to be half potted and even offers me a small shot of some dark liquid, which I decline. I tell him that we are delegates in the WSIS, which changes his tune and allows us to extract ourselves more quickly and without any payoff. We also take the opportunity to ask for directions and find we are just a few hundred meters away from the major auto route for which we have been searching.

We head south on the toll road, arriving at the first major stop, El Jem, at around 11:30. This town has a remarkably well preserved colosseum from the 3rd century A.D. After a rather mediocre lunch in a local restaurant, we head inside the colosseum, where we spend over two hours. It is a fascinating place, offering great photo ops. I go through the entire place, from the dungeons, where they kept the savage animals and the gladiators, to the rafters, where I can imagine the wild spectacles in the arena below. I am transported and transfixed.

We get in the car after doing some window shopping in the craft and junk stores surrounding the colosseum and drive southeast along the coast for hours. We end up in one of the larger coastal cities at night fall, cramped, tired, and hungry, short of where we had hoped to end up, but unable to go any further. We drive around the coast for quite a while, searching for the hotels and

restaurants that we surmise must be there somewhere. After some considerable frustration, we locate the accommodations and settle on the Oasis Hotel, a supposedly 4-star resort that by my estimation merits 3. It turns out to be quite upscale and also sort of funky, but there are no complaints. It is right on the Mediterranean and we go out on the beach for a walk. The hotel restaurant is OK and the internet connection is better than in Tunis, which is not saying a whole lot.

In the morning we leave early again to head toward to famous resort island of On our way there, we go near the Libyan border. At one of the roundabouts we see a sign for Tripoli, which Paul wants to photograph. I pull over so he can get the shot, but one of the ubiquitous cops out in nowhere comes over and starts to harass us about what we are doing and why we are taking pictures. We play the dumb, lost tourist game and he lets us go after a short, unpleasant interlude. We take a car ferry to the island, which is OK, but the island itself is a big disappointment. It is flat and boring and turns out to be a big diversion from the much more interesting parts of Tunisia. However, we see several signs for the WSIS, even here! It is clearly a big deal for the government, if not for the people outside Tunis. After driving around for a while, we head back and encounter a big camel herd, which breaks the monotony of retracing our steps back to the desert.

The desert turns out to be the really interesting part that day. We drive on small, windy roads through the arid foothills, going through ancient settlements of Berber herdsmen. It is way cool. Our target is the area of troglodytic Berber herdsmen. Troglodytic means (desert) cave dwellers, even now. One of the Star Wars movie desert scenes was filmed here, so it is a big tourist trap, but definitely one worth checking out. We walk around, take some pictures, and buy a few small gifts, then head off for more desert scenery and ancient towns. Our farthest point is a small town that offers camel rides in the dunes and irrigated date orchards. Paul gets his photo ops with the camels, but not the ride, since the day is waning and we have a mammoth ride back to Tunis ahead. We stop to buy some of the dates as well and drive by some big salt flats and back toward the coast as the sun sets. It is a beautiful landscape with great roads everywhere.

After night fall, while still driving along the coastal route, we try to find some place to eat. Quite surprisingly, there are no hotels or restaurants anywhere. We are about to turn inland to take a big highway to cut down on the driving time, so we figure that if we don't find a place to eat before the inland turn off that we will not find anything at all. In the small town, just before the intersection we drive by a string of outdoor barbeque emporiums. These all look virtually the same, brightly lit, with a few plastic tables and chairs on an outdoor porch, and a smoking barbeque. Each place has a sheep hanging by one leg in the open air from the rafters, the only difference being its state of butchery, with carcass dissected and fur hanging down.

We drive past at least eight such places in the hope of finding something else, but realizing that this is the only game in town, we decide to brave it and go to one of these places at random. I ask in French for a menu, but there is none, just sheep steak or sheep ribs. We each choose one, but the cuts are indistinguishable. We ask for cutlery, but there is none, just paper plates and plastic cups and fingers. We are served some hacked up bread in a filthy white plastic basket and some of the Tunisian mildly spicy sweet red pepper paste that is *de rigueur* with every meal. We have

water instead of some local booze, which is the only other beverage choice. We devour the meat with our fingers while o'er the ram parts we watch the traffic go by.

At the same time, of course, we are being watched by the locals, who apparently find us as entertaining as we find the whole ludicrous dining experience. They end up becoming big friends, showing us how to butcher the mutton and making us hack away at it. We of course take pictures for posterity and for subsequent evidence of death by food poisoning. Before leaving, we each visit the toilet, which is the old hole in the ground, except that the floor all around is covered in piss and (hopefully) sheep blood and smells even worse. Now that was a memorable dining experience!

We get back to the hotel around midnight and get hassled by the security people because we have not registered for the WSIS and do not have the Summit ID pass. I have driven 1500 km in two days and I am exhausted and in no mood to dicker with these pricks. We somehow manage to keep our cool, which is probably a very good thing.

The next three days I take part in a pre-WSIS scientific conference at the Corinthia Khamsa Hotel on the Past, Present, and Future of Science in the Information Society. I am an organizer of a couple of sessions, co-chair of one, and speaker at three (including two subsequently at the WSIS venue itself). I have done more than my fair share. Moreover, I am the originator and co-author (with economics Prof. Paul David of Stanford) of a major international project, the Global Information Commons for Science Initiative (GICSI), which is formally being launched by CODATA at the WSIS.

All-in-all another very successful journey...

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Notes from the Emirates
October 2015
by
P.F. Uhler

Meimei and I left Paris for Dubai via Istanbul on October 1. I am speaking at the Eye on Earth conference in Abu Dhabi on October 6-8, so we decided to do some sightseeing in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). We figure it's probably the only time we will visit there.

We arrive in Dubai very early in the morning of the 2nd and take a short taxi ride to the Hilton on Dubai Creek. Our room is ready, even though it's only 7 a.m., so we are ushered into our corner suite—a very spacious room overlooking the small river, with downtown Dubai in the distance.

Dubai is the largest city in UAE, about 2.5 million people. It sprang up out of the sand when oil was discovered in the Emirates. Prior to about the mid-20th century it was a camelot and the people there were nomadic herders. Some 50 years later the cities are extravagant oases, with the indigenous population living high on the hog, so to speak.

We come to learn that no one can own more than 49% of a business there, so the controlling interest is always in the hands of a UAE citizen. Moreover, one cannot become a naturalized citizen, even if born there, so the indigenous population just sits back and watches the money roll in—whether in the form of oil proceeds or the profits from any business. It is a racket and the beneficiaries are the camel jockeys, one or two generations removed.

The locals make up less than 20% of the population, with the large majority living there being the people who do the work. These are mostly folks from south and south-east Asia: Indians, Philipinos, and Chinese—with a smattering of Europeans, Americans, and Ozzies who run the chains and the larger businesses. The latter live in an enclave for foreigners located mostly between the Dubai marina and the Palm—an artificial promontory in the Arabian Sea in the shape of wait, you guessed it, a palm. Very ritzy. We are told that the former—the service industry types, the construction workers, the taxi drivers, and small shopkeepers—live mostly in very crowded apartments, which is all they can afford. They send whatever excess salary that they make to their relatives back home.

The foreigners are very much a second-hand population, however, working for the privileged few, and they are treated that way. In addition to the poor living and working conditions, everyone has to put up with a truly hideous environment. We see online that Dubai is one of the ten most polluted cities in the world. And although it is mid-autumn there, it is about 100 F and 100% humidity.

The sad state of the environment is worthy of some more elaboration. We are shocked by the extreme humidity prevalent in a sandy desert. There's little foliage and no water to speak of, except the sea itself. We had assumed—wrongly—that the desert would be dry as a bone. Instead, there is the requisite heat alright, but also a pervasive wetness in the air. It is so humid that at night the air literally sweats beads of moisture that trickles down as a rain-like substance,

making the pavement glisten and forming puddles on the sidewalks. Five minutes outside is enough to drench your body head-to-toe. And in the summer, the temperatures regularly rise another 15 or more degrees F.

The filthy air is also a surprise, but not so much when one experiences the sultry atmosphere that doesn't move and just hangs there. In a big city like Dubai, this means that all the car exhausts are trapped, as are the energy sources for the ubiquitous and cranked up air conditioning. Add the refinery pollution that must be present from somewhere there and voilá, you have an atmospheric brew worthy of the worst hell-holes on Earth.

Fortunately, most of the denizens and visitors like ourselves spend most of their time indoors in air-conditioned bliss, as described more fully below. Even many of the foreign gofers, such as the drivers and large numbers of other service industry staff, spend their days sheltered indoors. But the numerous construction workers and some other unfortunates must work in unbearable conditions that would send yours' truly boarding an air-conditioned ride home in a matter of minutes.

Meimei says all this reminds her of the Beverly Hillbillies. I couldn't agree with her more, so I have changed a few words in the original TV song to memorialize this, as follows:

Come listen to a story about a man, Ahmed
A herder of sheep, barely kept his family fed,
Then one day he was shooting at some food,
And up through the ground came a bubbling crude.

Oil that is, black gold, Arabian tea.

Well the first thing you know Ahmed's a millionaire,
The kinfolk said, "hey move away from there!"
They said, "Abu Dhabi is the place you ought to be"
So he packed-up the ol' camel for the coastal UAE.

The Palms, that is.
Swimming pools, fancy bars...

* * *

After napping all morning on our first day in the UAE, we decide to go downtown, especially to the huge Dubai Mall, which seems to be the center of the universe down there. We explore the whole area and get somewhat oriented.

The mall itself is vast and very upscale, with every designer and fancy chain store represented. There are lots of confectionaries that peddle boxes of candies that seem to start at \$100. There's a whole wing of every watch maker in the world. As we come to see later, there is even a Rolex building in the Old Town area. I have visions in my head of some sleazy Ali rolling up his cuff to show a bunch of watches for sale—except they are all diamond studded, solid gold, and real.

We go by the ice skating rink, for future reference. We do not to go to the massive indoor aquarium that dominates the center of the mall, since it seems like a rip off. We also decide not to spend \$130 each to ride the elevator to the top of the Burj Khalifa—the world’s tallest building du jour—to look out over smoggy Dubai. We do eat some pretty good Indian food in an upscale food court.

After that, we brave the outside air to get some pictures of the Burj Khalifa and the fountain below it. We also explore the mall immediately across the fountain from the Dubai Mall, but of course it is more of the same.

We head back to the Hilton in the late afternoon and go for a swim in the rooftop pool. The sun is setting and the temperature is bearable, especially when submerged in the warm water. The view is quite nice, overlooking most of Dubai and with an attractive whitish mosque with two spires next door.

Because Meimei is a gold member, we get Executive Lounge privileges at the Hilton. They serve good food there, both for breakfast and at dinner time. They also pour copious amounts of upscale booze, which we indulge in. The UAE is an Islamic country, though not very strict, so although alcohol is generally banned, they allow it to be served in western hotels and restaurants, as well as in nightclubs.

This brings me to the “clash of civilizations” that Samuel Huntington and others have written about. There is most definitely a fight for supremacy between the largely post-theistic, liberal West and the medievalist, Islamo-fascists of the Middle East. Leaving aside the fractious Sunni and Shia currently bedeviling everyone everywhere, there also are manifest degrees of Moslem purity. The UAE is of the more tolerant, “westernized” version of Islam, although striking dichotomies remain.

One of the greatest differences is between fire and ice—the heated environment of the children of the desert and the frigid artificiality of the North. It is true that the nomads grew up in the desert sun not long ago and that the foreigners have brought their ice palaces there. But as the sheikhs got richer and softer, they embraced the air-conditioned environment and made it their own.

The same is true with other, more pernicious western customs, such as booze and nightclubs. Whereas the stricter Islamic states impose their mores everywhere, including in western enclaves, the sheikhs of the UAE are more indulgent. In fact, by all indications the younger generation there likes the nightlife, baby.

Another key difference is the 3rd-class status of women. We see many in black burkas and men are allowed “several” wives, although not all women are so subservient and western women are not even expected to cover their heads (except in a mosque). However, everything appears to be separated according to the sexes and the men run everything. I assume it’s not as bad as Saudi Arabia, but it’s definitely an issue.

And although there are so many mosques per sq. inch that one can see 4 or 5 from many intersections, there is not a commensurate religious fanaticism that is evident in other Islamic countries. The malls and other public places do play the chants at the appointed hour on the

loudspeakers, but no one overtly kneels down and prays to Mecca, at least not where we tread (and, by the end of the trip, we have covered substantial territory throughout the country). No one appears to carry a personal prayer mat.

My personal view is that this is partly in response to official governmental policy in trying to construct a more secular state, while increasingly taking advantage of the seductive trappings of the infidels. We are infidels, by definition, and I'm sure you don't want to cross the law, but the boundaries are beginning to blur.

In the future, if the trends of the jihadist and sectarian conflagrations continue in that entire region, I can see the UAE becoming a target, especially given their size and wealth and relative softness. In that event, their nativism and strict policing will not protect them sufficiently, although their brotherhood with Qatar, Oman, and especially the House of Saud may. I also see it as one of the roads in a brutal, regional conflict. We shall see.

* * *

We go to bed quite early and get up to walk around the Old Town on Saturday morning, ostensibly before the oppressive heat arrives. One needs to take the term "Old Town" with a grain of salt. There really is nothing old in the UAE, its fame and fortune having literally sprung up from the sand in the past half century. Oh sure, there is an old fort here and there, some remnants of an outpost, the early memories of an oasis. But Dubai is not one of those places, and even if it were, it likely would have been bulldozed over for some exorbitant parking lot.

So, after a short taxi ride, we set off to walk in the Old Town. The place we are meandering through is about a half mile to the right of our hotel, on the opposite side of Dubai Creek and toward the sea, quite far from the modern downtown area. We walk around, get lost, hit some cul de sacs, and tempers rise with the heat. We find one ancient looking structure, which turns out to be a museum, with hordes of tourists waiting to get in. Not us.

We find an old market area, which is another way of saying low-life ex-pats running scams out of ramshackle hovels. We buy a t-shirt and hat at NY prices and declare victory. There is one picture of me wearing an Arab headdress cum Italian tablecloth, at least before I got pissed.

We escape to the river and take one of the "water taxis" for 1 AED (the current exchange rate is 3.7 AEDs to US\$1) to the other side. The river is not grossly polluted and the air is relatively refreshing. We garner the heat on the other side and go to the old souks—the spice, household furnishings, gold and jewelry, and other markets. We eschew the goods "made expressly for you," although going into the jewelry shops with the air conditioning blasting is a welcome respite. There are busloads of Chinese tourists everywhere.

By now it's about 1 p.m. and we are hungry, despite the heat. There is nary a restaurant to be found among the souks, however. They appear to have a one-track mind. There are no hotels there either, so by chance we stumble upon a sign for a restaurant, although the entrance to it is a mystery. We walk around and past it, but are directed there by a local, who overheard us talking about it. We go through an exterior courtyard door and an interior one, both unmarked, and we arrive at the place.

It has apparently been open for less than a year, as the banner for it some ways away proclaims, but the more immediate signage indicating its actual location leaves a lot to be desired. It turns out to be a large tent, fully air conditioned. It is the only authentic local cuisine we encounter: some lamb and chicken, rice, unleavened bread, water, and condiments. The meal is quite good, despite some flies, Arab gawkers, and no beer.

We are exhausted at this point and go back to take a nap. We have a dinner reservation at the Osseana Restaurant in the Atlantis Hotel at 8:00. The Atlantis is a ~\$1B resort, similar to other \$1B resorts built by the South African, Gaylord. Other examples include: Sun City in the middle of nowhere, South Africa (to which I have been twice and written about); Atlantis in the Bahamas; and the Gaylord Hotel in Oxon Hill, MD, across the Potomac from Old Town, Alexandria. No doubt, there are others.

This Atlantis is at the end of the Palm and an ode to ostentatious wealth. I will not belabor its splendors, many of which are captured in our photos. We go to the Osseana, which has its own massive aquarium, not for eating though, like at the restaurants in China. We have a bottle of Sancerre and Evian, a coffee drink, and a Neptune feast, which is really good grilled seafood with excellent vegetable accoutrements and much more than we can eat. This repast sets me back about \$500.

After dinner we go to some hotels on the main drag, looking for a nightclub to dance. All the places require a reservation or purchase of a table for 2000 AED. They also have bouncers and a dress code. After a few unsuccessful attempts, including Club Cavalli (after the Italian designer) at the Fairmont Hotel, we go back to the Hilton.

* * *

Early Sunday morning we go to “the Walk”, which is by the residential area for the expats and near the Arabian Sea. We take some pictures on the beach and head for another big shopping venue, the Mall of the Emirates, for the main attraction and the principal reason I wanted to come to the UAE, to Ski Dubai. It is a hoot. For about US\$75 you get all equipment, ski clothes (except for a hat and gloves), and a ski pass. There is a quad chairlift that stops halfway up and continues on another dogleg to the left, for a vertical of about 300 feet. There is a dogleg presumably so that you cannot see the top from the bottom, giving the appearance of a bigger area.

It is very cold, about -4 degrees C, so the lack of the hat and gloves catches up fast. The snow of course is artificial and presumably is made at night. It has the consistency of fairly hard mashed potatoes, but there are no icy patches.

We ski a few runs and take some pics. We also go to the little chalet at the halfway point for some refreshments and to warm up. A couple of hours of this is enough. There are some other attractions at the bottom—a kiddie slope, a toboggan run, an inner tire tube run, communing with some penguins—but we skip that. On the way out, I am surprised to learn that there are no postcards available, so it’s a good thing that we took some pictures to memorialize the event.

After the ski experience in the desert, we look for something to eat at the mall and decide to go to a Lebanese restaurant. The food, unfortunately, is rather mediocre and the worst meal of our

stay in the UAE. We then do some shopping in a huge Carrefours, where we buy some souvenirs and gifts for back home.

In the evening we go to a Thai restaurant, which overlooks the big fountain at the base of the Burj Khalifa. The fountain has a famous water and light show, set to music, which lasts about five minutes every half hour. It is quite spectacular.

After that dinner we go to another nightclub that has been advertised online. Like most clubs here, it is open 23:00 – 3:00, and we are one of the first to arrive. The weekend in Moslem lands is on Thursday and Friday nights, with Friday being the holy day, so Sunday is not the big night out and is a regular work day.

Also like most clubs here, it is very snooty. We aren't allowed on the main dance floor, which is presumably reserved for some others yet to be determined. We dance to a few bad songs, mostly hip-hop selected by a DJ, have a drink, and leave after midnight when the place starts to fill up.

As we exit, we see two other clubs further away from the street, including one completely outside that is playing some good dance music. It would be a great venue, but we are enveloped in the humid hell. Meimei dances one song with an older gentleman and we make a hasty retreat, already completely drenched with sweat. I said, Sheikh, rattle & roll.

* * *

On Monday morning we leave Dubai behind and take a taxi to the St. Regis just outside Abu Dhabi, about 1.5-hours away. The ride is uneventful and costs only US\$60, one of the few bargains we encounter in the UAE.

The hotel is spectacular and the best one I have stayed in. I have been to my share of 5-star hotels, and the best are in Asia and also, apparently, in the Middle East. We are put up in a sumptuous suite overlooking the pools and restaurants, and then the beach and Arabian Sea. Most of the meals are delicious and free as well.

We take a taxi in the late afternoon to downtown Abu Dhabi. It is much smaller than Dubai, but the capital of UAE. Think Sacramento to Los Angeles; Albany to NYC; you get the picture. We do some sightseeing and picture taking, but it is not overly exciting.

On Tuesday I go to the Eye on Earth conference, which is well-attended and has quite a few old friends there, some of whom I haven't seen in years. I prepare my presentation for Thursday and then attend the banquet dinner with Meimei, who has been doing some more sightseeing in the city. The banquet is quite good, but dry.

I play hooky the next couple of days, sleeping in, eating well, swimming in the pools and ocean, and generally luxuriating in the surroundings. In give my talk on Thursday morning and the other speakers on the panel are also very good. We have a decent turnout of about 60 participants and I am pleased.

On the afternoon of the last day of the conference, we go for a 5-hour tour of the desert. We get into an SUV with some Spaniards and a woman from Jamaica and set off. Our driver, and the

apparent owner of the outfit, is Indian. For the first 20-minutes we are on highways, but then we suddenly veer off the road into the sand dunes and do some major dune bugging for another 20 minutes or so. It is in tandem with nine other SUVs. It is like a big amusement park ride, but a lot less safe I think—at least it feels so. It’s definitely not for the faint of heart.

We stop by a camelot for some photo ops and a short while later we arrive at our main destination, a small oasis in the dunes. There are camel rides, dune boarding, hookah smoking, dressing up in Arabic garb for photos, refreshments, bar, and a pretty good buffet. Even the bathrooms are clean. The piece de resistance is a belly dancer, who invites a lot of audience participation.

After about 3 hours of this, we are all happy and exhausted, and ready to go home. Fortunately, there are no more wild dune buggy rides.

* * *

On our last day in the UAE, we are even more adventurous, and rent a car. After a lot of to and fro to get a working GPS, we set off. For the first hour or so we go on the major highways, which I come to learn are rated the best in the world. There is a lot of foliage bordering the highways, but it is only about 50m wide, with the desert sands beyond—an environmental Arabian Potemkin Village.

We arrive at the UAE’s second most populous city, El Ain, around noon. It is rather non-descript and has little to show for itself. It is modern, with large boulevards, and the lights are on but no one seems to be home. The main attraction is outside the city on a high rocky mount, with a view of the hazy desert below. The weather is sunny, hot and humid, but more attenuated than on the coast.

After spending the better part of the day in El Ain and environs, we decide to go south to some other places in the UAE. The fastest way to our destination is through Oman, the neighboring country, so we try to do that. After about an hour of sign language and some pidgin English we are turned away, since we do not have the requisite permission from our rental car agency to go to Oman.

We go along the barbed wire border for a few km, and then drive back across El Ain to the mountains in the south. It’s a nice drive on two-lane roads. We come across some small towns with outdoor markets and rugged scenery, but nothing spectacular. The sun has set and we need to head back to the Dubai Airport.

On the main highway back, I change lanes hastily and side-swipe an SUV driven by an Arab with a local family. We pull over by the side of the road and thankfully no one is hurt. The SUV driver is very polite and doesn’t want to exchange info or call the police, so after a few minutes we leave. I report the “hit-and-run” accident to the police at the Dubai Airport as we turn the car in. It’s the last time I have the privilege of dealing with the monstrous heat and humidity, as we bid adieu to our strange trip in the UAE.