

Paris 28, September 2009

Farewell 9-13

Dear Friends and Family,

9-13: No, not the number of hours worked per day (although that, too) but the north latitude at which I have spent most of the past three years! So, since July 3rd my body has been going through major adjustment to settle into 48 degrees north latitude in Paris and temperatures at least twenty five degrees Farenheit below the prior norm. It has been a beautiful summer here (some would say hot, but for me most days a sweater).

I am writing this on the TGV train to Strasbourg (2 hours nonstop from Paris) where I studied at the University 46 years ago – my last stop before beginning my working life. This is my first time to visit since then.

For settling into retirement the summer has been a perfect blend of enjoying visitors, hanging out with old friends, unpacking into the apartment and completing myriads of administrative tasks. Happily, most of those tasks are behind me for the moment. Next week I'll head to Agadir, Morocco, for two weeks to initiate some significant improvements to my apartment there. Then I'll be in the US for 8 weeks from the northeast, to southeast, to California, Anchorage, Seattle and the Midwest.

I have settled into a daily routine which starts with swimming at 7 am. The pool is about a



fifteen-minute walk from my apartment along shady Boulevard de Clichy. Public pools in Paris are great (there are 38 of them) and a bargain at 19 Euros (seniors, 34 Euros others) for 3 months unlimited time at all pools. This exercise, walking almost everywhere, plus up and over La Butte Montmartre at least every other day has helped me almost reach my goal of shedding 10 kilos – returning to my ideal weight which I was last at when I left Benin in early 2006.



I was fortunate during my final three months in Thailand to do some wonderful travel in Asia. Right after we swore in volunteer group #121 I escaped the hottest month of the year in Bangkok (April) and went to Japan for two weeks. I traveled by train using the Japan Rail pass and focused on central and northern Honshu island plus Kyoto. Of course, the gardens and temples were stunning – I was even in snow fields after climbing 2446 stone steps to a temple in Tsuruoka. Tokyo, with about the same population as Bangkok, had an entirely different feel – probably in part due to the extensive public transportation system, bicycle usage by people of all ages, and sidewalks for pedestrians instead of vendors. The neighborhoods

were peaceful, parks plentiful, and eating out, while not as cheap as Bangkok, was manageable on a budget.

Outside of Tokyo not much English is spoken, but the train ticket agents did, the restaurants all had photos of their dishes, and I had pre-reserved all of my hotels. One of my favorite dishes was the whole wheat noodle dishes of Kamakura south of Tokyo with a rich broth and either vegetarian or other ingredients. Everyone talks about the train system but it is truly phenomenal. At Tokyo station there are literally dozens of large trains departing every 2-3 minutes for destinations near and far in Japan. It seemed as if all the 747 airplanes in the world couldn't touch the passenger capacity of the system at that one station! And they are spotlessly clean and punctual to the second. Also, interestingly, virtually every hotel I stayed in had identical pre-fabricated automated toilet/shower facilities in the room. They would be a great export product to a lot of countries I can think of.

After returning to Bangkok for a few days I headed to southern India. This was a trip I initially planned to do when I was in Sri Lanka, but our premature evacuation eliminated that option. Everyone said I was crazy to be in India in the hot season, but in reality, due to much less humidity than Bangkok, the weather was quite manageable. I also spoiled myself by traveling with a private car and driver! My circuit started in Madras (now Chennai) then circled south and west through the temples of Tamil Nadu state, then west through the beautiful hilly (and cool) tea growing area to Alleppey and Fort Cochin in Kerala on the west coast. On the return loop by train I stopped in Mysore which as the guidebooks say is justifiably a visitors' favorite – I visited an enormous highly automated silk sari weaving factory and, by contrast, women hand rolling sandalwood incense sticks! My first night was spent in Pondicherry, the formerly French state. At Villa Helena I had probably the best croissant of my life for breakfast in a lovely garden. Unfortunately the restaurant that is famous for bouillabaisse was still closed for summer vacation.

Just this tiny piece of the giant sub-continent of India was incredibly diverse, colorful and lively. People were friendly and helpful everywhere. I came to really enjoy the cuisine and really missed my breakfast of idly and curry when I returned home. It was summer vacation for schools so there were huge numbers of (mostly Indian) tourists, but I only encountered one non-Asian couple during the entire two weeks. It was also national election time and watching the process unfold was fascinating. It is amazing how India functions with its very diverse and independent states.

Note that there are no photos in the above text because unfortunately when transferring files to my new personal computer I somehow lost all of my Japan and India photos! But I still have the memories in my brain.

Before completing my tenure with Peace Corps, I also took a couple of local weekend trips – first to Kuala Lumpur and then to Jakarta. Kuala Lumpur is a truly beautiful city. With only 2 million people it has way more public transportation than Bangkok and is very pedestrian

friendly (unless you are mobility impaired). Predominantly Muslim it was interesting to see the young women dressed in Hajib, generally modest blouses and unbelievably skin-tight jeans!



The contrast of the primarily three story traditional “shop houses” with the stunning skyscrapers was breathtaking. What I will remember the most is the Islamic architectural influences all the way from 19th C colonial buildings to modern high rises. And with every high rise, a very large amount of park land surrounded it.

There is a beautiful Chinese Buddhist temple in the heart of Chinatown and a very vibrant “Little India” where the fabric trade mostly takes place. Outside of town is an important Hindu shrine in a cave, the site of an annual pilgrimage drawing more than 100,000 pilgrims from all over the world. Right in the heart of the historic center of the city where the two rivers meet (Kuala Lumpur means muddy rivers) is the oldest Mosque – Masjid Jame – which is very beautiful.



I also visited the impressive National Mosque which also has a playground for the Koranic students. All in all I felt it was a very livable city.



Visiting Jakarta caused me to focus on the enormity of Indonesia. Stretching 5000 kilometers from west to east it has the largest Muslim population in the world, geography easily as varied as the US, with some of the last remaining jungle vegetation on the planet. Transport within the country is still largely by water (I watched men loading sacks of cement onto a sailing cargo ship bound for Sulawesi). The National Museum had wonderful exhibits of the varied cultures and ecologies of the country. I could have easily spent an entire weekend just there. Jakarta was much more spread out and not as walk-able as Kuala Lumpur so I had to do more focused transiting to specific destinations. The central park with its National Monument allowed a view of most of the city and orientation to its different districts, including the Istiqlal mosque.



Here, too, people were very friendly and helpful. Some students asked to practice historic English with me in the central city. Families were picnicking and enjoying the parks and flying kites was very popular.



My final trip was a taste of China: Beijing, Hong Kong, Xian and Macau. As I expected, Hong Kong was spectacularly beautiful. A great skyline always with a backdrop of green hills and

water. The high density new towns preserve the surrounding natural beauty which is inspiring as is the highly developed transport of all modes. Photos couldn't capture the magic of the



views returning into the harbor. I even took an aerial cable car on Lantau Island to visit a giant Buddha on a rainy/foggy day.



I loved the high energy of the city. A special memory is the man selling fake Rolex watches on the street beneath the sign for the Rolex store, and, of course high tea.



Then on to Beijing. I don't think I had any preconceived ideas about Beijing. But its 17 million people are spread across 150x150 kilometers, so it is much less dense feeling than the other Asian capitals. My hotel was in a typical neighborhood (hutong) just a 10-minute walk to the Forbidden City. There is now a highly developed Metro system and excellent roads, but the primary transport (people and



goods) is still pedal power.

The traditional hutong neighborhoods have dwellings clustered around interior courtyards and lanes, and sanitation is provided in public bathing/toilet facilities which are maintained by the

city and are very clean. I was fortunate to be invited to lunch with a family in a local home.



On the boat to the Summer Palace I met a lovely family.



The day I went out to the Great Wall I was very happy to have a car and driver, as the walk from the bus parking area was longer, hotter, and more strenuous than the wall itself! It is hard to imagine the building of it in such strenuous terrain.



Xian is a lovely city, completely low scale within its reconstructed perimeter wall with a beautiful park along the surrounding moat. The Muslim quarter (70,000 Muslims in Xian) is a

lively traditional souk-like shopping area and the Great Mosque dates back to 784.



My guide was surprised at my interest in this area, and, frankly it hadn't dawned on me until then that the silk road went both ways – i.e. Muslims made their way east! The mosque's caretaker was delighted to have an interested visitor who spoke French.



I had not realized that the terra cotta warriors were originally brightly colored, which disintegrated after exposure to air. The archeological process had just resumed in one of the pits a week before my visit, for the first time in over ten years. But the plan is to hold off significant further excavation until technology can solve the color loss problem.



I found that most of the young Chinese spoke very good English and with less pronunciation difficulties than the Thais.

My final day I took the hydrofoil the 65 kilometers from Hong Kong to Macau. It was interesting to see the colonial architecture – much more prevalent than in the other Portuguese



outposts of Fort Cochin, India or Essaouria, Morocco. Some areas feel Chinese, and food is

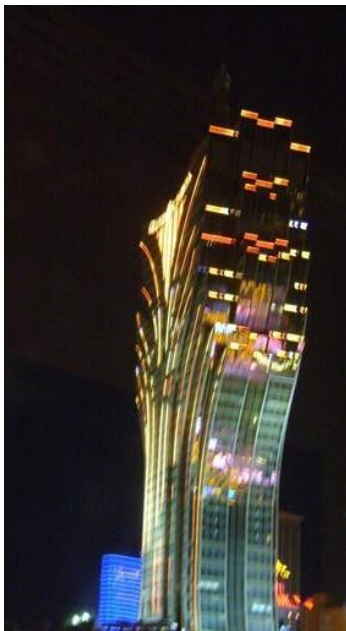


available for every taste!

Multiple religions are also represented.



Today Macau mostly serves as a gambling destination for Hong Kong Chinese. I love neon as an art form and was lucky to have a view from my hotel room of the amazing neon light shows that went on all night on the facades of the casinos. I must have watched for an hour and no pattern was repeated! Again, the photos can't do it justice.



So now I am looking at the bucolic French agricultural countryside from the train window. About as stark a contrast to Asian capitals as I can imagine (except jungle). I still keep expecting the green to be rice paddies instead of wheat, corn and grapes. Clean, sparkling streams are another surprise and the fish that emanate from them. I spent last week in Fayolle, a village of 10 houses in St Medard d'Exedeuill in the Perigord region south of Limoges. So quiet, peaceful, with farming and products continuing as they have for centuries (a bit more mechanization, but

not much). Walnuts are still hand gathered and grapes are hand- picked. It is sad, however, to realize how many traditional gourmet foods will be lost when there is no new generation to work the land.



And as I am finishing this letter today I saw a pair of great blue herons in Park de Monceau nearby in the 17th arrondissement!

Hopefully some of you will be able to experience more of France in the years to come. I have been fortunate over the years to live in many places that people travel to, so I've been able to keep up in person with many friends.

It will undoubtedly be winter before I write again, so I wish everyone a fruitful harvest season and blessed Thanksgiving.

Love and Peace,

Marilee

