

2000.01.29 from St. Petersburg, Russia

Helsinki : After spending a couple of days in an unseasonably warm Helsinki, I've now spent 5 getting-colder days in St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad). Helsinki was quite a nice city for walking about it which is most of what I did there.

There was a very interesting modern art "Museum" called Kiasma which I would recommend going to if you are there. I quote it because it is also part library, part cafe, part meeting place, part venue. The nicest part may have been that the temperature was around 0 Celcius instead of the normal -20 C. Makes all that walking a lot easier when you're not freezing to death.

St. Petersburg: The train to St. Petersburg was relatively uneventful save for the border crossing. It may have been just me but the atmosphere just seemed to change--I think that the numerous guard towers and the defensive emplacements were a little intimidating.

Once in St. Petersburg this atmosphere evaporated from my event horizon. St. P is a wonderful city, very European in some ways and quintessentially Russian in the rest. I'll only touch on the highlights of my travel there--the rest is in the guidebooks... Through a friend of a friend I met a St. Petersburgian named Ira. She was a wonderful host in that she and I wanted to do many of the same things as well as the fact that she is a very nice person. What this translates to is that we went out to the opera, theatre, or ballet every night I was in town save the first (when I went to a place with an American guy studying Russian for a time here).

High culture is very much alive in St.P--there are ticket outlets all over the city and there always seems to be a queue in front of them. Over the space of 4 nights we saw "Swan Lake", "Rigoletto", and "The Marriage of Figaro"(the first in the universal language of ballet and the others in Italian). All were wonderful and to boot, I think that the most expensive ticket was about 45 Rubles (about US\$1.75)!

As for museums, I can't say enough for the grandness of the Hermitage--an incredible building and an equally incredible collection of art from ancient Greek to the early 1900s. One of my favorite parts was entitled "Lost Treasures quot or something like that--pieces, mainly paintings, "liberated" from Germany after WWII by the Red Army. Another day I saw this recent movie called (I think, in English) "The Barber of Siberia". I thought it was a fine film but heard dissenting opinions from some other Russian friends. Films here have a single, usually male, voice speaking about twice as loud as the original dialogue, and no subtitles. You'll probably get more out of the film in the US or wherever you might be, but the crowd won't be wearing furs and the credits in Cyrillic...

There was, of course, more but I must leave you now and determine what the heck I'm going to do about a Chinese visa. It seems that everywhere it takes 2 weeks and I'm not going to be in one place for 2 weeks! More on how that all turns out later.

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2000.02.04 from Ulan Ude, Russia

Question #1: Where is Ulan Ude?

Ulan Ude is east of Lake Baikal is the Siberian republic of Buryatia. It is a city of about 300,000+ people. It is best known for its Bhuddist influences and for a collection of Bhuddist icons, statuary, etc. that was rescued (preserved?) from the Soviets and is now housed in a Museum devoted to it and local history and culture of the Buryat people. The first of this kind that I've seen, I'm nonetheless impressed. With my knowledge about the Soviet mentality about religion, I'm surprised that any of this was left around. Apparently it was stowed away in a crumbling church until about 2 years ago when it was moved to its new home in the museum. (The crumbling church was probably a more romantic venue for such a collection, but it is now under reconstruction.)

It is a different city that others I've been to thus far, bring both smaller and farther east. Ulan Ude is pretty close to Mongolia and is the last stop on the Trans-Mongolian train in Russia. Even so, it is amazing how much it looks like any other Russian city in its buildings and infrastructure (even going so far as to outdo larger industrial centers in its ability to darken the winter sky with pollution). What is different is the ethnic makeup--I'd say about half of the people on the street look Russian with the other half made up of Buryat, Mongolians, and Chinese.

Moscow: My experience in Moscow was a lot different than in St. Petersburg mainly in that I was hanging out with twenty-somethings and that I spent a lot of time doing things related to the mechanics of making a trip work--a.k.a. the Chinese visa.

It was quite obvious that Moscow was a Russian city, not really a European one. It is laid out in a series of roughly concentric rings with major arteries as spokes, with the outer quadrants filled with industry and high-rise residential buildings. The center of these rings is the Kremlin with Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral, Lenin's Tomb, etc. just outside the Kremlin.

St. Basil's is a very impressive structure, towering over Red Square with its domed towers. After having been to the Church of the Spilled Blood in St. Petersburg I was expecting a similar interior but was surprised to find a comparatively spartan one. Compared to the all-surfaced mosaiced interior of CofSB, St. Basil's was only painted. It also had some icons and an annoying babushka informing everyone that you must walk through one room only in one direction (why, I don't know--it had 3 or four doors).

Unfortunately, I never did make it to see Lenin. Sorry to those who recommended me to see him. It is the one thing I really feel I missed out on as a tourist in Moscow.

Instead I went out at night with Duke Mitiagov and his friends. One night I got insight into the local music scene at the "R-Club"--a venue which reminded me a lot of Go! studios in Carrboro (without the balcony, oh, which really makes it like the Cat's Cradle, doesn't it?). The first band was an amazing throwback to '84 arena rock (Megadeath, anyone?) though I think that they didn't know about the throwback part of their image. The second was called "Drugly Cats" and was a lot of fun. Sort of punk band with an updated electronic sound, Duke was doing some promo photos for them. You heard about them here first, folks.

Another night we went out to see what kind of nightlife was around. It turned out that most of the dancing venues that they knew of weren't dancing that night and so we finally just sat around and talked over beer and vodka. I had a lot of fun that night and thanks go to those who made it possible (Duke,

Paula, Andrei, Denis, Luda, Misha, Katia, and Masha) (with apologies for any name misspellings). Find some I-net stuff of theirs at [family.da.ru](http://family.da.ru), [dsign.newmail.ru](http://dsign.newmail.ru).

Oh, the Chinese visa. Well, here's the short version. I could either wait 7-10 days in Moscow (after spend nearly a whole day and a lot of walking figuring that out--it seems the rules are different for Americans), wait a week in Kharbarovsk, not go, or go by way of South Korea. Weighing the options, I've now determined that 7 days in Kharbarovsk is not the answer and going to Korea is. Looking forward to lots and lots of bulgogi, bibimbob, and kimchee (again forgive the spelling).

The Train to Irkutsk: I took the #2 "Baikal Express" for about 80 hours to Irkutsk. It was in good condition with nice provodnitsas (the carriage attendants) and, as it turned out, interesting compartment-mates. The first was a young woman (devushka), Tanya, going to Omsk who studies Law in Moscow and in her first year. At first we both thought it was going to be very boring but she let on that she knew some English and as it turned out we talked the entire day. "Some" English turned into enough to fill a day.

Halfway through day two Tanya alighted and Albert arrived. He works for a vodka factory in Omsk and was on a frequent trip to Irkutsk on Business. It seemed to me that nearly 2 days sessile on a train wasn't all that good for business, but we really couldn't communicate and I never did figure that out. Anyway, he was a really nice guy and it helped that Vladimir (a conductor on the train) assisted us with some conversation ranging from US earning power to Chechnya to upcoming Presidential elections in both countries.

As it turned out, my imagined compartment consisting of a tractor driver and her 3 children and a drunk pensioner man was severely different from the very pleasant trip.

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2000.02.11 from Vladivostok, Russia

Irkutsk: Going back in time a little bit, I'd like to mention my time in Irkutsk since I had a lot of fun there.

I was highly recommended to get in touch with a guy there named Jack Shremetoff who does tours of Lake Baikal, Irkutsk. and the surrounding area. (Website: [www.irkutsk.ru/sheremetoff/](http://www.irkutsk.ru/sheremetoff/) Since I only had a short time in Irkutsk, I was only able to see a small part of all the amazing wonders of Baikal but nevertheless was very impressed. Irkutsk as a city was as different from St. Petersburg and Moscow as they were from each other. About an hour's drive down the Angara river from the shore of Baikal it is a charming city of ordinary streets (not the traffic-clogged thoroughfares of Moscow) many lined with the leafless trees of winter.

In the downtown (and of course the outskirts as well) were some great examples of the wooden architecture of Siberia. I took a lot of pictures but alas I too must wait to see them. Most (all?) of these houses are without central plumbing and so on every corner in these neighborhoods there is a common water pump. At first I thought of how romantic and quaint it was to see the people come to their pump with a 25 litre "milk-can" on a trolley in the middle of winter. After seeing a couple of people do this and noting the whole process a little more closely I realized how hard it must be to live this way! I think on that day alone it was probably only a high temperature of about -20 Celcius (-4 F) which made just the navigation of the person and trolley over the sometimes icy streets a little treacherous. It also explains a little why it is apparently more desirable to live in a charmless grey housing block than in one of these beauties. (Someday I'd like to turn the house at 14 Gagarina Ulitsa into a small hotel. Maybe.)

I've taken a certain interest in the architecture of Russian churches in my time here and Irkutsk was pretty good for that as well. I won't go into all the history of Soviet repression of religion but needless to say they didn't leave all that many churches around and those that remained were sometimes just left to fall in on themselves. In the last few years since the demise of the CCCP there has been an effort to restore some of these. Now while this is nice and all, for me it takes away some of the authenticity of it all (but what do I want, a pile of bricks instead?). So it pleased me to no end that after going by the Kazanskaya Cathedral (under interior renovation) that Jack mentioned that there was another church a few blocks away that hadn't yet had anything done to it. This nameless church (it probably had a name, but we didn't know it and it surely wasn't anywhere to be found) had obviously been passively or actively "neglected" for a long time. It wasn't falling down but some of it's domes were bare wood and partially destroyed and all of whatever exterior decorative painting had existed was gone. For me this was a rare opportunity to see how the structure was constructed and to understand what kind of effort it had taken to raise it from the ground. Uch-ti! This church is one of the "gold-star" highlights of my trip.

Listvyanka: My big excursion to Baikal was out to the town (village?) of Listvyanka. Just north of the Angara River (the only outlet of Lake Baikal) it is a long, small town devoted to the fishing industry. We first stopped at the a muesum of Wooden Architecture which was collected from all around the province and the area inundated as a result of the 1954 dam on the Angara at Irkutsk. Interesting. There were also some traditional amusements set up and we both took rides on animal skins down an iced wooden slide. Just into Listvyanka we stopped at the Museum of Limnology and saw two very young, orphaned Baikal seals. They seemed to be perfectly happy to be in their tank swimming around and playing splash or just "push the other guy out of the water." This was actually one of the more interesting stuff-animal-and-rocks museums I went to and not for its size--the collection was small but very

good--but because there was a woman there who gave a very informative tour to us in English! (Go Jack!) Like the frog in St. Petersburg, my favorite here was a fish that lives in the depths of Baikal (which gets down to about 1600m) that is essentially a blob of fat with a skeleton. If you take it out of the extreme pressure of the deep, all that you get at the surface is a skeleton and it's formerly associated body which has exploded into a big, amorphous glob.

After a very local and delicious lunch of pelmini (kind like a ravioli with only ground meat inside) in broth along with a hot smoked omul (red fish from Baikal) we went to the end of the road on the north end of town and went down to the lake. This lake is about 30-40 km across at this latitude and you could easily see the mountains on the other side. Walking out onto the ice was an interesting experience. After passing the jammed up ice from the first week or so of the freeze we got out onto the smoother part where the ice turns from cloudy to clear. It was quite obvious that the ice was considerably more than 50cm (2ft) thick because of the imperfections in it but one still had the reflex not to step out onto it because it was so clear you could see all the rocks on the bottom which was probably 5-10m (15-30ft) below the surface. (Although this was hard to determine in itself because everything was so clear.). Amazing! And then a car pulled up and asked if we knew the way to somewhere... Just around sunset we went out on the ice again and you could hear this occasional, incredibly powerful snapping of the ice as it cooled from the "heat" of the day. I liken this sound to that of a thick cable snapping under tension or the report of a gun and it's echo rolling off the hills. In all, this day was incredible!

I mentioned [before](#) about my time in Ulan Ude.

Train to Vladivostok: In Ulan Ude I boarded the No. 2 train "The Rossia" which goes direct from Moscow to Vladivostok for some kind of 6 or 7 day trek. Thankfully Vladivostok was only 3 days away, and even that was trying on the mind and the body. My compartment mates were Andrei, a 24-year old police officer going to Chita, an older babushka (maybe 60?) going to Kharbarovsk, and Vladimir, a 30ish ex-military guy going to Vladivostok. The first day was pretty easy since Andrei spoke decent English and we were able to get a lot of the curious questions asked and answered. I was also educated in the rules of Russian Checkers and Nardi (same board as backgammon). I'm no better at Russian Checkers and the American rules version and lost at both. I wish I could say that the scenery was various and scintillating, but I cannot. Siberia is great and vast and its size is difficult to fathom, but in the winter the tiaga looks all pretty much the same from one hour to the next--white snow with grey vertical trees. Having traveled by car across the American west and back again I can say that the US has something on Siberia in terms of visual interest, but it can not hope to compare in size.

For entertainment Vladimir and I both did some reading (he with something by Longfellow and I with "Crime and Punishment"), looked out the window, got hot water for chai or coffee, got off at a station halt to walk around, etc. At night he was interested in mainly alcohol and it is quite difficult for Russians to drink alone and without parity, I think. For you, dear reader, I will relate just one anecdote about these experiences: the call to drink.

Steps 0: Procure some beverage, vodka (500mL) preferred, but if absolutely necessary beer will suffice. Make sure it is the evening.

Step 1: Get a twinkle in your eye and with your thumb and forefinger, gently thwip/plink/thump your gullet (if you have one) or your second chin (third or fourth are optional if equipped) and at the same time, say, "Drink, Drink?".

(Step 1.5: make excuse. If denied or ignored...)

Step 2: Heartily accept the offer and pour a drink for each person.

Step 3: Take a piece of black bread and if at all possible soak it in the juice from a can of fish. Keep at the ready.

Step 4: Make a toast (to druzhba, or peace in the middle east, or to the great Russian explorer Kharbarov, or whatever).

Step 5: Exhale through the mouth.

Step 6: Just take that vodka right down in one big gulp without letting it hang around in your mouth at all!

Step 7: Inhale deeply through the nose the wonderful aroma of canned fish juice on black bread.

Step 8: Make a short burst exhalation through the mouth.

Step 9: Sincerely talk about how good it was and how lovely the atmosphere is etc, etc.

Repeat.

Vladivostok: Eventually we arrived in Vladivostok (maybe worse for the wear) and parted ways. I ended up spending more time that I might have liked had I had a better idea of what exactly there was to do there. The city form is sometimes compared to that of San Francisco and while there may have been similarities in 1900, it is frankly hard for me to see many similarities now. Maybe I can compare it to parts of Seattle and San Diego and Pittsburgh, but the best comparators are the other cities in Russia. The harbor with some portion of the Russian Pacific Fleet was an interesting focal point for the center of the city. There was a fine view to be had of the greater part of it from the top of a hill served by a funicular railway (like those in Pittsburgh and, well, Dubuque, Iowa). I even got the experience of going into a movie theatre (US\$0.60 admission) without a clue as to the picture being shown. It turned out to be a very well dubbed version of the recent Star Wars: Episode I. I mention the dubbing particularly because everything, and I mean everything, else has been a pretty poor one- or two-man overvoice with the English barely (aggravatingly) audible under the Russian. Even the prologue scrolled off into the distance entirely in Russian--I guess Lucasfilm decided to put some cash into it.

The weather was considerably warmer in Vladivostok than anywhere else I've been--about 2 degC as a daytime high. This made the snow into slush and most things into kind of a mess. It also made my wonderfully warm down jacket nearly obsolete. It was great in Irkutsk but I'm afraid that global warming and the coming spring have made it obsolete for the remainder of this trip. Whatever else there was in Vlad. wasn't all that exciting, sorry to say. Maybe give it a few years (or the summer) and see what happens.

Whew! I'm tired. Thanks for reading this far. 27 days in Russia, [Next: South Korea](#)

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2000.02.29 from Shanghai, China

Ni Hao! It has been a little bit since I last wrote and a lot has happened, but unfortunately the Internet access is getting sparser and the time more dear. I still welcome your email and thank those who send it.

From Vladivostok I flew to Seoul and ended up spending a little over a week in Korea. The bulk of the time I was working on a project for my former company--trying to finish up something which has existed for too long already. That I won't talk about. It was nice to get my mind wrapped around a nice solid problem and drill into it (a far cry from the kind of mental activity I've been engaged in, save the Chinese visa, probably).

In Korea I was able to hang out with friends from previous trips and without exception had an excellent time. On the weekends before and after (what was left of them after traveling) I saw some great things in Seoul--Kyong-bok palace, a Buddhist Temple secluded up in some neighborhood, a very old artist of traditional Buddhist painting (his name currently eludes me but is in some package crossing the Pacific as I write), the Seoul tower, a folk museum, shopping at Insa-dong, and the rest of the city in between. Seoul has always confused me in the past but on this trip I've actually been able to understand where I am in relationship to everything else. I think that between the lack of English on notable buildings and the sheer size of the city, I've always just gotten mixed up to where I was and where I was going. This time was different and I finally feel like I understand part of the place. Not that the 10-lane streets will ever feel that comfortable... One of the more interesting things was the folk museum. It astounds me how far and fast South Korea has come in the last 50 years and this museum was able to help me get it into perspective. One exhibit I thought was interesting: vanishing jobs. Rubber shoe repairman, hat seller, water seller (a guy with a yoke and two buckets), kitchen tool repairman. Outside were set up a lot of traditional games that mainly children and their parents were partaking of but we also enjoyed very old versions of hacky sack, lawn darts, see-saw, and a sort of top that you whipped with a stick rope.

The food was as great as ever. Some know and like Korean food and some don't know it but I don't know too many people who know it and don't like it. I enjoyed quite my fill of bibimbob (rice and mixed vegetables in a hot stone bowl) and kalbi (Korean barbeque) as well as Ja Jung Myoun (Noodles with a kind of brown sauce--Chinese food that you can't find in China). I redoubled my resolve to find a good Korean restaurant near home (New York City is just too far to go...). In some ways I'm also hoping that I'll get to go back again and finally finish this entire project up (for the food as well as the satisfaction).

Beijing: From Korea I flew to Beijing and spent a few days there seeing the major sights. The "Palace Museum" aka the Forbidden City was very impressive. Amazing to think about what it must've been like inside, back in the days of the Emperor. It sits like a massive, silent block at dusk when all have vacated and the lights of Beijing come on. The stillness therein is almost eerie. I watched that happen one night from the Jingshan park just to the north outside the palace walls and moat.

Another day we took a 2+ hour ride out to the Great Wall at Simatai. It was Amazing! This section has inclines up to 70 degrees and basically is perched on this steep and sharp ridge--"Who would ever try to enter China over that terrain?", I thought. Regardless, the steepness made everything more dramatic than I had expected. This section isn't heavily touristed (I think that our bus was the only one that day making us the sole focus of the hawkers) and hasn't been overly rebuilt. The seclusion and the absence of noise up on the wall really gave a good impression about the demarcation of "frontier" and "China" that is all the wall was to represent.

Ah, so. Maybe the hour is drawing late here and the rest of Beijing and Shanghai will have to wait. From here it is on to Xi'an, though I know not when I'll find the Internet again... My apologies for not being able to find time to send individual greetings. Hope good luck is finding your endeavours.

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2000.03.02 from Xi'an, China

Greetings! My motto thus far in China has been, "If you can find Internet, use it." And so I do.

Back to Beijing: The first day I was there the air was a a meduim-strength haze (as judged by my experience in American cities) and I was a little bumner, but at the same time I kind of expected the pollution to be bad in Beijing. Subsequent days found the air was far worse--worse than anything I've ever experienced before. (Some other notable days: Salt Lake City in winter with a layer of very impresive brown, Mexico City on a bad summer day, Los Angeles in summer when you can see the edges of shadows of buildings in the air...) I would guess that from on high you could see only about 5 miles before the buildings faded into the air and from the street level the distance was reduced to about half of that. You could nearly stare at the sun an hour before sunset without having the ghost in your retina. At midday it was more intense than a clear night's full moon, but I would compare it more to that than to the sun most of us are accustomed to. China may be hurtling into the 21st century, but the cost on the sky is surely high. Look for accounts of rising asthma rates in the coming years (well, assuming that the Chinese government would ever publish such things.)

On a slightly different note, like most non-English countries, China its fair share of funny and insight-lending signs. I'll relate two of them here:

- In the Forbidden City: "Shenyang Dawn Garment Group and Tourist Hold Each Other's Hands--Talking Care of Ancient Pines Cherish National Treasure"
- At the Museum of the Terracotta Warriors: "...under the guidance of the reform and opening-up policy of the party, all the staff and workers of the entire museum, getting united, working with all their might, cherishing their positions and respecting work, have built up a modern museum..."

Through friends of friends I met this guy--Mike--a couple of times in Beijing. He showed me a thing or two in the city and we had some nice meals. One of those was what people refer to as "hot-pot". It goes like this: You get this big divided stainless steel bowl with two broths in it--one is a milky-white chicken broth like liquid and the other is a Sichuan (spicy) dark broth with a lot of spices sitting on the bottom. You take this bowl and put it on top of a gas burner and let it boil away as you add your favorite vegetables to it to cook. This is sort of akin to fondue but without the cute forks, and a whole lot spicier than any fondue I've heard of. We chose cabbage, tofu, very-thinly sliced mutton and beef, and mushrooms to eat. mmm, mmm, good! The spice was the building kind that one associates with chilli peppers (cayenne) and hot enough that it had me coughing if you inhaled while preparing to munch. The tea served at this place was dry in the cup and this woman came by with a watering-can-like thing with the hot water. The spout was about 2 feet (60cm) long and she stood back a signicant distance from the cup as the water shot out like a very small fire hose. I was happy that her technique was honed.

Shanghai: Shanghai is pretty different than Beijing in form and in my perception of it's pulse. While Beijing was hazy and things were well worn, Shanghai was relatively clear and had many new things. The buses and subway for one thing and the showcase buildings for another. Shanghai also seems to be tearing things down and rebuilding more than Beijing, which weems to just sprawl out past the 4th ring road. It is also warmer. My first day there gave the distince impression that spring was upon us with its gusty winds and just the smell of spring in the air. I spent a lot of time just walking around here in attempt to figure Shanghai out.

One day I got fed up with my long hair, now more than two months since it was last cut, and decided to

have a shot at seeing what it was like here in China. I didn't go all the way, however, wimping out for a barber at the Peace Hotel on the Bund who spoke enough salon English to get us through. (By the way, I would recommend this hotel over any other for staying in Shanghai on business-lots of charm and the best location possible). Jack Wang used no electric implements and in total used 3 scissors, two razors, and a very long comb. The haircut itself was as you might expect. It was the added touches that were interesting.

First was the vibrating chair. Jack said that the Japanese really liked it and I suppose I did too. (REM: It wasn't nearly as fancy as those I enjoyed over Christmas, having only one, low-powered motor.) Next was the shampoo. He added another towel over my shoulders and did it sitting up in the same chair. That was interesting enough but to boot he gave me a head massage at the same time. Really, really nice though I was wondering if I would have any hair left on top when he was finished. There is a little still there. Finally was the rinse, except that instead of accepting his offer of having the rinse also sitting up, I declined and had the standard, lean-back into the sink rinse. I still wonder how he would have done it, exactly.

I learned that the famous Yixing teapots were made somewhat nearby in Dingshan, Yixing county. I decided that was an acceptable day outing and embarked one morning on a quest for a teapot. Now, having some interest in tea myself, I have seen these before in catalogs but have never (until now) harbored any real interest in procuring one for myself. I had seen these in and around Shanghai (also some in Beijing), but for far more than the US\$40 I was accustomed to (aka, US\$80-\$200 in the stores I looked in). The change at getting them cheaply at the source was too great to pass up.

The route was not so easy--the bus station was incorrectly marked in the [Lonely Planet](#) ("book of lies") first of all--first taking a train to Wuxi then a bus to Yixing and then another minibus to Dingshan. In all it took about 4 hours. Coming into Dingshan the ceramics started piling up. Literally. There were every shape and form of things ceramics all along the roads at shop upon shop. In size from Cisterns down to the teapots the selection included roofing tiles, piping, plant pots, vases, plates, and probably everything you can think of and I haven't written. My aim was not hard to find and I fell into a routine of going in and looking around, asking the prices, examining the pots, asking the price again, and moving on. The permutations on a theme were virtually endless but basically ran in shape from round to hexagonal to cloverleafed; in color from dark brown to green to bluish aqua to yellow, usually single colored but sometimes with measured impurities; form from simple to bamboo themes to vegetable themes to dragon themes; handles from round to square, small to big; spouts the same. I don't think I saw the same style twice. Eventually I got my booty and made the long trip back with the only difference that I got the last connection of everything, apparently (even had to get a motorcycle to catch up with the bus to Wuxi for about 10 minutes--nice scene with me and the yixing-ware on the back of the moto, I'd guess).

Back in Shanghai, the Shanghai Museum was really well done and I'd recommend it highly to anyone going there. Only a few years old, it has a very nicely presented collection of all kinds of Chinese art from ancient bronzes to traditional painting, to Chinese name stamps, to jade and coins. Very interesting, and what a history! The size and complexity of bronze castings done in 600 BC (yes, BC) were far, far more advanced than anything Western cultures could even dream of having made. Wow.

Xian: Now in Xian, I've taken just a single day to see the main attraction here--the terracotta warriors from the emperor Qin of about 2000 years ago. While an impressive accomplishment and doubtlessly a major archeological find, I was sadly let down from the spectacle of my expectations. Maybe National

Geographic is better than the real thing sometimes? They are still excavating "according to plan" which I took to be a very long-term one as nothing seemed to be going on. Maybe in ten years they'll have more and I can go back again to see the warrior-vaults I'd been expecting.

So, sorry to end on a downer, but that about takes us up to the minute. I did have a really wonderful dinner with a dish of tomato, cucumber, and peanuts sauteed in a spicy sauce. Tomorrow I'm going to a nearby scenic mountain, but I'm a bit afraid that the haze will persist. (Another measure of the air: my throat is killing me after a long day of inactivity or mild walking). Maybe it is time to move on to the more rarified air of Tibet...

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2000.03.14 from Chengdu, China

Greetings, Tovarishchi.

It seems we left off with my travel to the mountain called "Huashan". Because Xian was really getting on my throat I thought that even if the trip 120km there was rushed that it was better than pain and suffering with the dust. I may have been wrong, hehehe. Sigh.

Huashan: I was taking a minibus (the woman at the train station was about as helpful as a broken doorknob and more accurately as obstructionist as that same door stuck fast) there which shouldn't have been a problem but was anyway. After waiting an hour and a half for it to leave Xian, it took about 2 to go 60 km. We got the royal tour of this uninteresting town looking for passengers and finally just resting near a bridge while our driver and the three ticket collecting people (3!) just messed around outside the bus. Finally we coerced 2 more people onto this ~25 passenger bus and took off. Never let it be said that there aren't enough people in the service industry in Shaanxi--now all they need is some basic lessons like, "Be nice to the passengers," and, "Profits are lower when you have 3 people doing the work of 1." We eventually skidded into the "stop" at Huashan well after dark and I found a hotel for some exorbitant sum and had a pleasant "misunderstanding" with the restaurant whereby I got food for 3. At least it was good for the tummy.

Realizing that I had to allot much more time for the return trip to Xian I was up early in the morning hiking briskly up this mountain. There were none before me at 7am except for the small shop owners who greeted not with a "HALLO!" but with a "you buy you buy" while pointing at Coca-Cola and crackers from Hong Kong. Thankfully there weren't that many of them. The trail was nicely situated in a steep ravine heading up to the peak with a beautiful stream down below. Eventually I got to my turn-around time about 2/3 up the mountain and just hung out by the water until groups of hikers (all Chinese) started getting ahead of me. The way down was a little more interesting as I passed hiking groups young and old as well as the porters with bamboo yokes over their necks carrying loads from cases of provisions for the shops to bricks to roofing tiles. Looked like a really hard way to make some yuan.

I was very glad I allotted more time for the return, as my minibus unceremoniously ejected me in this same aggravating town as before and I had to take a perfectly empty one the final 60km back to Xian. It took us only 2 hours to find all our passengers making no fewer than 7 circuits. At least I enjoyed making comments to the driver--surely the exact meanings were lost on him but not the general one.

From Xian, I took an overnight train south to Yichang, which is a port on the ChangJiang (Yangtze) River. In 'hard sleeper' class you basically have a carriage with doorless compartments with 6 bunks in them and two fold-down seats in the aisle. Most of the time you spend sitting on the lowest bunk talking with the other people (or in my case listening of making very bad English conversation.) There is a policy of non-smoking unless everyone in the compartment agrees that smoking is ok which usually means that I get to play the heavy and try my wonderful Chinese for "you not smoking". It gets much funnier when they "don't understand" and try to light up or do in fact light up as I then get to try to usher them out with motions of "zou kai!" aka "go away!" Thankfully I don't have to resort to this often.

Yichang was not terribly interesting except for the fact that it sits just downriver from the Three Gorges (Sanxia) Dam site and it has a lot of construction as a result of the money pouring in. I managed to get a ticket on a boat going upriver leaving at exactly the time I wanted (8am) so that I was absolutely assured

that 1. unless I had the slowest boat in China or 2. the laziest captain that it was impossible to miss the Three Gorges. (The two other travellers I met were coming downriver and the posted schedules had been just paper--the Gorges were passed in the night and they saw nothing.)

The ChangJiang River (Yangtze) and the Three Gorges: Travelling 3rd class (of 4) may or may not have been the way to go, but it certainly was economical--8 bunks with a television and a washbasin for 140 yuan (~US\$17). This didn't mean 8 people, however, as children and maybe even spouses didn't seem to count. I expected that like the trains that at 10pm the lights would go out and everyone would turn in. Wrong. My cabin number 3-2 was an allnight, card-playing, TV-blasting, cigarette smoking, loud-conversing party hall. It was a shame that the karaoke lounge closed at 11, but then again the 5 yuan per day (US\$0.60) admission really drew a line about who went in and who didn't.

The ship was quite small compared to the others that plied the river--about 250 passengers vs. 750+ I estimated the standard ship to hold. It meant that clean air was at a premium unless on deck. I was very happy that it was cold, though a bit disappointed that it was so cloudy and even drizzling rain, because it meant that I got to sit on the front observation "deck" all by myself, all day long. This was in opposition to the aft deck with the swirling diesel exhaust or the karaoke lounge where smoking, loud mahjong playing, and even the occasional "farmer blow" onto the carpet was de rigueur. Oh! the cultural difference!

The Gorges themselves were nice enough but, quite frankly, I was not all that impressed. Every few hours you would see two signs on the hills showing the future 135m and 175m water levels after the Sanxia dam is completed. This reminder was nice--it put the future change into perspective. I should note that when I first heard about this project and the destruction it would cause, I was outraged. Having been there and seen everything but possibly the effects on the fish population I can't say that I feel the same way. The ChangJiang is one of the more polluted rivers I've seen as the constant flow of instant-noodle-bowl flotsam would indicate. The towns alongside will certainly be better off in the new housing than the old, and the "industry" there couldn't have brought much wealth anyway. It consisted mainly of moving coal around from trucks onto ships by human power.

Chongqing: After 2 days we arrived at an early 5am to a cold and rainy Chongqing (called Chungking back in the day). I had planned to stay there a day but the idea of strolling in the rain didn't hold much and I took the most efficient bus in China--just 4 hours to Chengdu by a new expressway including a 15 minute break for breakfast.

Chengdu had slightly better weather, but not a lot. Chengdu (pronounced more like "Chung-du") is the big gateway to Lhasa and most of the travellers there are either coming from or going to the Tibet Autonomous Region. The riff about getting to Lhasa is that you must get a group travel permit from a travel agency. This is a kind of monopoly and not really a buyers' market. Consequently the prices are a bit exorbitant. Being the guy I am, I couldn't live with myself giving some jerk US\$200 just because he had some license to give out these permits. Thus I traded time for money, taking 7 days to get on my way.

The best part about Chengdu is that they are somewhat famous for teahouses. I frequented a number of them just to while away the afternoon with an endlessly refilled cup of green, jasmine, or stone flower tea. If the day was nice they were usually full of Chinese people playing mahjong or cards or just conversing. On such days there was at least one man walking around clicking this big tweezer thing as an advertisement for an ear cleaning. I watched this a couple of times with his big Q-Tip-like-thing and was

quite amazed that he could make his living off of wax removal. At least the people on the cleaning end seemed to enjoy it...

I met a lot of people in Chengdu, especially at "Paul's Oasis." Really an interesting place, it was. Run by a former teacher of Chinese philosophy who got tired of that, Paul was a really fun guy. His place was a cozy little den that sort of resembled a fraternity-house room at the end of a wild year. It was quite a meeting point for westerners both living in Chengdu and just passing through. It seems that I was there 6 of my seven nights...

One interesting thing that came out of this was a couple of trips to a (Chinese) disco or two. The first one we always went to (I did this 3 nights) was called either "Focus", "Jiao Dian", or two other names. There was some kind of set schedule where from, let's say, 12:30-1 there was a formation dance group that everyone watched, then 1-1:30 was some kind of terrible "opera", 1:30-2:15 was actual dancing to house-ish music. I was led to believe from the people I'd met that the dancing style of most Chinese was very conservative (i.e. moves staying well within some kind of acceptable range of motion) and quite repetitive. My opinion was that this was generally true with a few people with some rhythm and style breaking out of the mass. I should temper this by saying that the hotbed of dancing which is my home town has dance floors not all that much different than dear old "Focus." Promptly at 2:15 the music stopped and people were quickly ushered off the floor to be wooed by the abrasive voice of a man singing old Elton John-like songs in Chinese until about 2:30. At this point if you had been able to withstand the aural onslaught of this man-klaxon you were obliged to leave. This was one form of Chinese dicso, apparently.

Eventually I was able to gather up a group of people heading to Lhasa and we were able to get the Tibet Travel Permit for a reasonable (sort of) sum. Since some time has passed since I started writing this I can say that I've hung out with a few of them most of the time I've been in Lhasa. Lots of fun and a nice break from purely solo travel.

With that I need to sign off. I'm going into the country and won't be accessing anything electronic for about 3 weeks at which point I'll be in Nepal, probably.

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2000.04.09 after visiting the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Peoples' Republic of China

Tashi Delek! My first point should be that I may refer to "Tibet" by the single word. At no time should you think that it is a singular country nor that the "Autonomous" in the province name means the same thing as the dictionary might suggest. It is very much a province of China (PRC) and is becoming more and more Chinese each day, month, and year. I came away with some strong opinions about the situation there and may voice them in full strength. (That's the warning.)

Lhasa: Lhasa is still the capital of the TAR and retains some of its Tibetan history and influences, mostly centered in the area around the [Jokhang](#), and the kora (circumambulation circuit) around it. (a variety of pictures around the kora may be found at <http://www.asianart.com/kora/kora1.html>) It was a very nice change from the people of Sichuan to see all the Tibetan faces nearly always smiling. I used and thought of the words "Infections smiles" many times while walking around. I should be so kind as to just leave it at "the Tibetan areas were positively wonderful to be in."

If you're thinking of going to Lhasa or the rest of Tibet, I would advise one of two courses of action:

1. Don't. Save your money or give it to the Free Tibet Foundation or other group struggling to return the representation to Tibetans. The Tibetans didn't ask for the Chinese to come into their country and from the current state of affairs of a government in exile in India, I'd guess that they don't really want them there now, either.
2. Go now. Through numerous structural and cultural "programs" the Chinese culture, language, and society are infiltrating and overwhelming those of the Tibetans. See it for what it is today for it will certainly be less and less as time has and does march on.

As I was walking around on the streets of Lhasa, I wondered about the Han Chinese to Tibetan ratio in Lhasa. Being a holy city, I would have thought that there would be an overwhelming number of Tibetans on the streets and in residence. I asked questions, in hushed tones, about this to some friends I'd met there.

The official Chinese government figure says about a 30/70 ratio (Han/Tibetan). If you were to exclude yourself to just the area around the Jokhang you might believe this was true--unfortunately this is a small area of the now-set-to-sprawling Lhasa. As you walk to the newer areas you get the feeling that there are many more Han people than you first thought. It is not just that all the signs are in Chinese--the official governmental policy is that Chinese must be in a larger typeface than any other language and must be included--but that there is no Tibetan on the signs. This includes road signs. One also notices a distinct lack of Tibetan people in these areas of town. Not only are they not there shopping, but they aren't living there, either.

New housing seems to be always done in the Chinese style (and looking dreadfully out of place)(but not for long, 'eh?) and I never saw a Tibetan living in them despite my looking long and hard. The number of traditional Tibetan buildings that remain have dwindled significantly in the past 10 years. Thankfully through the vounteer efforts of a few Europeans there is a sort of registry system now and most, but not all, are to be saved from the sledgehammer.

In all, despite the difficulty of trying to integrate the areas and populations of them I have to assume that the official estimate is in fact inverted and that 70% of the residents of Lhasa are Chinese and 30% are Tibetan. Let's conjecture for a moment on one potential reason a centrally controlled government may wish to see such a ratio exist: Pressure from the western world for return to true Tibetan autonomy leads

to small changes in Chinese policy which does not satiate world opinion. Government takes western principle of a "referendum" and applies it to the TAR. Tibetans, outnumbered by Han Chinese through decades of officially encouraged immigration (for instance, giving important and well-paid government jobs almost exclusively to ethnic Chinese who then in turn encourage family to move to Lhasa), mount a pro-independence campaign but are out-voted 70-to-30 by recent immigrants.

I'll admit that the political thought here has not been long thought out, but possibly at least the kernel of the idea may be valid.

There is also an air of political thought suppression in Lhasa and in fact all over Tibet. Only rarely would people speak of the situation there and usually in those times it was in low tones with some other kind of aural distraction with known people. There were many jokes about "the walls having ears" but usually the tone was pained with the knowledge that it was more than half true. Certain phrases like "Dalai Lama", "Dharmasala", and "Free Tibet" were rarely used, instead substitutions like "the big man" and "There" were used. Everybody wants to at least leave open the option of getting back to Tibet and getting on the wrong side of the Chinese thinking machine would likely close that door forever. This also means that I won't be sending this along to anyone in Tibet for their sake.

I get down off my soapbox now and promise to send more travelling news along soon.

## **A few links on the web**

- [Free Tibet Campaign \(UK based\)](#)
- [www.tibet.org](http://www.tibet.org)

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2000.04.09 after Western Tibet Autonomous Region, Peoples' Republic of China

Sometime during my week-and-a-little in Lhasa, I got introduced to 4 British guys--Matt, Robin, Charlie, and Dave--who were heading up a trip to Mt. Kailash in Western Tibet. As it turned out, I ended up spending 18 days with them in a Toyota Land Cruiser over 3800km (2280 miles) of some of the worst roads I've seen on 5 continents. There were more than a few 200km, 10 hour days seen and only at the beginning and the end was there the luxury of pavement.

The Setup: Try and imagine the situation first: 1 American, 4 British guys from 18-19 on the gap year between HS and University, a "guide" named "Sher Rap" who speaks some decent English but only guiding English, and a Driver named "" who is pretty rude, a pervert, and speaks little English at all. Take this human cargo, put it into a Land Cruiser with 2, 100 Litre drums of leaking gasoline, a bunch of luggage on the roof and in the back (including a quarter of a semi-dry goat), a propane stove with two tanks, and food for a small army, and you have a recipe for the situation.

The reader who has mathematical skills and some history in Land Cruisers may be wondering, "how do 7 people and all that stuff get into the available seats?" The answer was coined "meat" and it was not pleasant.

Meat: When you have 7 people to split among two seats and a very full boot/back area you come to the conclusion that A. the guy who owns the company "Alex Chundak" is a liar, a sadist, and an astute businessman (a near quotation, "One person can sit in the fold-down seat in the back. You can have the guide sit there."), plus B. someone's going to have to sit in the back with the seat that is impossible to fold down due to the petrol drums. Just you, the petrol cans, the sun, and little ventilation. We first called it simply "the boot" but I later christened it simply "meat". It stuck. So, every 3rd day you got the opportunity to sit in the back and basically be a side of beef for the comfort of the other passengers.

Dealing with being meat: 1. Petrol fumes. The driver and guide were always pretty unconcerned with leaking petrol. This was because the air in the front seat (from which they never left, and incidentally, the guide even got a little uppity at the end of the trip by trying to stick one of us in the middle of the front seat next to our perv driver) was significantly better. The air for meat made me nauseous after about an hour. Most meat stints were for a half day, meaning 4-5.5 hours. In the back, I'll remind you, you are positioned behind the rear wheels and any bumps are magnified. This equates to being airborne at least once a meat and if you were as unlucky as I in having some of the worst roads on my meat, a lot. Luckily I was only injured once while fully airborne--I landed on my elbow on the rim of a propane gas cylinder.

Basically I learned to put on the walkman, pad myself with everything possible, get as horizontal as possible, and attempt to put myself in a state of mindlessness. No thoughts, no looking around, shallowest breathing (except a little aromatherapy, maybe once a meat). It sucked. Meat sucked.

There, now that off my chest. Oh maybe pone last thing. One day I lost my voice to petrol fumes. Now, finished.

Western Tibet: All this was for the spectacularly sublime scenery of Northern and Far-Western Tibet. The colors dazzled with their earthiness. The gradients astounded with their slightness. The valleys amazed with their limited range of browns, yellows, and greys. So simple and so grand. Shadows of clouds drifting across smooth hills.

There were no cities, one town of size west of Shigatse, a handful of small towns (up to 100 people), and

only uncommon villages of 10 or fewer dwellings. It is a land without people and most of those who are there are nomadic. Most all of my time was spent just looking at the scenery and every once-in-a-while the people and their herds going past.

It is not an easy life there and that fact can be seen on the sun-darkened and wrinkled faces of every nomad from 15 to 50. I envied them as much as I pitied the Tibetans on the streets of some town who had lost their noble lines. Maybe this is why the Chinese regulate foreigners' travel to heavily--stories in the newspaper run together into a stream of world problems while faces of the people leave a strong impression no the observer. Such emotions aren't regulated well and the government is not quite so foolish to underestimate what those people might do outside. I hope I can be one of them.

I obviously got my fill of the changes wrought by the Chinese. It hurts a little to write about a lot of that stuff and it makes me angry. Here's a line a wrote on the 28th of March: "Lunch was in the dive-est town we've yet encountered--Tsakachu. Basically only a series of low buildings temporarily populated by truckers and more permanently by the kind of Chinese who smash bottles to make it more like their former home." I also enjoyed paying \$5 (40 yuan) for a hotel with the toilet hole across the street, no internal plumbing, and a downstairs restaurant that allowed the smoke from an ignorant firestarter to billow up the stairs as opposed to outside.

Corruption:I did find a little enjoyment in the rampant corruption. For instance, at the ruins of the Gu-ge kingdom the entrance fee was supposed to have been paid in Lhasa--we had the document, permit, and stamps proving it. They said "No. Must have here. Lhasa permit no good." The price is supposed to be 60 yuan each. He said 280 (\$35). Now having driven an entire day through the dustiest badlands we might think of, we weren't about to not see them. I talked with the boys and the guide and I got him to take \$100 for the 5 of us. Robbery, but we then forced the guy to give us receipts which didn't match up. Funny.

Of course, we couldn't take pictures there--against official policy. In most places they don't want you to take pictures of religious artifacts. In this place they didn't want you to take pictures of the absence of them. The Cultural Revolution dealt a huge blow (or lots and lots of small ones) to everything but the walls of these places. Not even they all survived. The piles of rubble with half-faces of Bhuddas and bits of scripture waving from them were signs that nothing much had changes since the 60s except that the dust of destruction had been piled up. There were no Bhuddas--there were spaces where they had been. There were a two guardians at the door of one of the temples, but they were missing arms and had had their insides ripped out and exposed--nothing more than straw and prayers on paper. Stripped of their skin they were a more powerful symbol than any other I'd seen before or since.

Mt. Kailash: 2-4 April is too early to do the kora. Too much snow and too cold. The locals said it was not possible. One group of westerners the week earlier had turned back at the pass. A group of locals had done the same a few days earlier. We did the kora. Best trek I've ever had.

Towards the end of the trip, I just wanted food other than fried rice and to be in clean air. Clean air was a luxury in most of China but most of all in out land cruiser and where we stayed. Yak-dung fires burn pretty cleanly, but the smoke of their starting can last a long time in a room shut tightly against the cold.

Coming down out of the Himalaya I had the experience of instant spring. Nyalam was snowing and cold--reminded me of the French Alps. The next morning we were in Nepal with green leaves and warm afternoons. Winter to spring in a single afternoon.

Finally, As for the yak butter tea--you can't find it here in Nepal--at least nowhere I've asked for it. It has a kind of rural taste that one probably wouldn't want if one could help one's circumstances enough. You could make a close facsimile by taking black tea and making it strong, then adding some cow butter to it and churning it up. Finally you would have to swab down the cow's udder and add a little of the essence and drink up. That's yak butter tea.

- [NY Times article on changes in China at historical sites](#)

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2000.05.16 from North Carolina, USA

Tovarishchi, it appears that I've made it. Thanks for sticking with me.

It is a little strange to be sitting here in the home that I left four months ago doing the same sitting in front of a computer that I did in lands far off. Things here have changed but I've changed much more it feels. Travel is one of those rare things one can do that simultaneously molds you as it frees you to take your own form and as it sharpens your focus upon the myriad details of having a satisfying experience (that you can walk away from) it allows those brief moments of lucidity that seem either all-too-infrequent or missing from everyday life. It seems like the wisdom that comes from a few weeks of living by and for yourself in a strange land is about the same as one amasses in a year of the comfortable and predictable existence we have at home. I can't guarantee that I've been able to share even a meager morsel of that which I have gained, but I can only hope that you've gotten something in return for having read this far.

Kathmandu: After the whole experience (which sure seems a lot different than I wrote a few weeks ago--the rose glasses of time and distance) with the Land Cruiser I just felt incredibly tired. It made me wonder about the ultimate sanity of any professional driver who spends days on end in the confines of a vehicle, let alone people not hardened to the realities of life in a truck who have elected to pay for the experience... Kathmandu was a great place to just rest. I wish that I could expound upon the temples I visited and the places I traveled to, but there wasn't that much of that, frankly. I could recommend some enjoyable places for coffee (Chikusa in Thamel somewhere and Cafe Culture just off Freak Street) as well as good, inexpensive vegetarian restaurants (Paradise Restaurant and the Cosmopolitan, both on Freak St.) where you can wile away an afternoon over a book--my favorite pastime there it seemed.

Travelling to Kathmandu from the border at Zhangmu/Kodari (PR of China/Nepal) was interesting enough as we first hired a truck to take us the 5km down the hill to the Nepali border post. I felt privileged to be able to sit in the cab while the others stood in the bed with our luggage until I realized that fitting my knees in the allotted space was anatomically impossible. The conversation with the driver was the easiest I'd had in months--the Nepali twang on Indian English was not difficult to understand and we had a fine chat about things from Chinese-Nepali trade to popular music. We also realized that we would soon be suffering from the time lag arising from the One-China policy--crossing the border into Nepal also set our watches back 2h15m and brought us back to the world of 6am sunrises (as opposed to 8am) and days of symmetric lighting.

From Kodari to Kathmandu is about 140 km through the foothills of the Himalaya to the Kathmandu valley. I had noticed that on the front bumper of every truck and bus (including our steed) was painted "Max Speed 40 km/h" but thought that it was likely some kind of government wish or requirement and that we would be whisking along in excess of that pace on our brief hop. How wrong I was. With the beautifully verdant river valley rolling by at the leisurely pace of 17km/h we had plenty of time to collect our thoughts about what we would do in Nepal. It was also the time when I realized that my travelling blokes in Tibet were reverting to their pre-me dynamics and that I was soon to be a solo traveler again. In any case, US\$3 and 7.5 hours later, we arrived to a city with most of the comforts of the west--things not seen by our weary eyes for many weeks--and individually had Pavlovian responses to our favorite vice, Snickers candy bars being mine.

For the next few days I wandered leisurely around Kathmandu just taking in the atmosphere. The city is inviting and interesting, a place begging to be lost in so that one may see the small treasures hidden in

alleys and down side streets far too narrow for all the pedestrians and the passing motorbikes (honking) and the auto-rickshaw (honking) and the bicycles that inevitably crowd them from dawn to dusk. I was constantly amazed by the incredibly skilled wooden carvings adorning the old buildings and on temples and monuments. It made me happy to see them out and in the air where they've always been as opposed to squirreled away in a museum for fear of their disappearance.

Eventually I figured out that getting to London wasn't going to be as easy as I'd originally thought. In fact, it came down to it that unless I wanted to A) pay a huge wad of cash, or B) wait for 10 days, I would have to fly to Paris. (I can feel your commiseration with my dilemma, I assure you). Like every other flight, this one on Gulf Air was uneventful. What was a bit fun was the ride to the airport. Initially the taxi driver and I had arrived at the almost-mutually-agreeable sum of 150 Nepalese Rupees (about US\$2.20) for the 30-45min trip to the airport. What bugged me was the like so many other drivers, this guy wanted to use his horn to honk (hoot) at darn near every person or vehicle that had the smell of potentially slowing down our craft. It was a little annoying to me and so I offered the driver the deal that I would give him 200 NR if he was able to get to the airport without hooting again, 150 if he did. I had the best time watching this ingrained reflex being suppressed (at the rate of about 10 times per minute) time and again with the promise of a hefty fare. In the end, I was 50NR poorer, but the fun of the hand stopped midway to slapping the steering wheel and a quiet half-hour ride was totally worth it.

A short note on the Abu Dhabi airport--who designed this thing? To get off a Gulf Air flight and find yourself at or past midnight in this terminal which is designed as a honeycomb-like progression of hexagonal ceramic tile patches as the central support rises from floor to ceiling with women in head-to-toe black garb is dreamlike to say the least.

Paris: What could I possibly write about the city of lights that hasn't already been penned by someone more skilled? Well, first of all I was interested at the stark differences between Nepal and France. Point One: the exchange rate in Nepal was roughly US\$1=NR 68 while in France it was roughly US\$1=FF 6.8. Point Two: Price tags in France were strangely close to those in Nepal. For instance, Internet access in Kathmandu was incredibly cheap at about 60 NR per hour. In France the tariff was a stiff 60 FF per hour. It seemed that a host of things were about ten times more expensive in Paris than Kathmandu--just a tip to those people with desires for a big trip on a little budget...

Maybe the best part about Paris was the food--the fine cuisine made double wonderful by the recent memory of five straight meals of fried rice with peanuts and other bland fuel I was forced to sustain myself with. I will remember one particular night with a spectacular Alsatian dish at some friends' local brasserie for some time to come. Every meal regardless of how basic (chervre and baguette with red vin de pays, for example) was great, lovely, memorable.

During the non-eating day I did a lot of aimless walking about trying to learn the city through its form and the people there. Inevitably one finds oneself at famous places when engaged in this kind of touring and I was no exception--a day at the Musee d'Orsay, an afternoon at the Louvre, two evenings at the Centre Georges Pompidou, a walk past Notre Dame. The best afternoons I spent reading, watching people, and napping in the Place de la Concorde while the clouds of spring breezed past (saving their rain for the approaching evening).

Nice: after my week in Paris, I took the TGV south to Nice and hung out with friends there. Probably the calmest part of my trip, there is little more to tell of than beautiful weather and a day-trip to Monaco. That was the first time I've ever seen two Ferrari F40's cruising at 25 km/h through narrow streets and

probably my last. It was a nice afternoon spent touring and lounging next to the sea next to incredibly expensive high-rises.

London: Moving right along, London was both as wonderful and fun as I remembered it as well as quite a sad time as it signaled the last stop on my four months of world-bopping.

What should I say? Some things had stayed the same and many have changed since my residence there in the summer of '93. The Rosemary Branch Pub was still there but my favorite freehouse had succumbed to the Pret-a-Manger deluge. The Starbucks density was more than slightly revolting. (On a high note, I had the best espresso I've every tasted at a place on Shaftsbury Avenue near Tottenham Court Road.) I was graced with staying with great people and couldn't appreciate more the kindness of not spending my last travelling days in the impersonal realm of hostels.

I saw a lot of theatre including: a series of dances set to Elvis music, "Blue/Orange" a play examining the psychiatrist-patient relationship and the nature of mental "illness", "Summerfolk" based on work by Chekov, "The Merchant of Venice" but more in the late 1930s than the 17th century, a French movie premiere "Les Enfants du Siecle" with the director (Diane Kurys) and a writer, and also some less memorable stuff that we are entitled to forget. One bummer was that the Tate Modern was opening just 4 days after I left--that will have to wait for next time, I guess. The most enjoyable afternoon of all was spent in the spring bloomings of Kew Gardens. I would recommend any-and-everyone to go there if possible when in London not only to see the multitude variety of plants but to enjoy the walk along the Thames and through acres of trees on the grounds.

Home: And then, like clockwork, like an inevitable force, like a boring pulp magazine, I got on the Tube then off the Tube, checked my bags, argued with the security guard, braved Duty-Free, and boarded the aircraft. The flight was memorable only for showing the same movie I watched on my way from the US back in January. Then, with the same feeling as is derived from placing the last piece in a difficult puzzle, I arrived to the same North Carolina I had left. Home again.

And so this story ends. As Tim Cahill summed it up best, it was, "Another triumph of man and machine over time and the elements."

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