

Christmas in Shanghai 2008

Christmas 2008 and I travelled to Shanghai to visit my friend Irina. She works for Morgan Stanley and has a 6 month posting there. Irina has a lovely modern two-bedroom unit in a serviced apartment complex. The bathroom features one of those lovely electronic toilets, with a heated seat, adjustable bidet and a blow drying feature. I could spend at least an hour playing quite happily in there (sorry, no photo).

The French Quarter is an amazing labyrinth of laneways with interesting shops cafes and bars – think a variation on Melbourne’s laneways. The shops were very interesting; Shanghai has a developing modern art scene, admittedly it is helped by foreign tourist purchasing power and newly wealthy local residents.

Many of the shops featured goods from countries other than China; I even found a store selling “designer” items from New Zealand. I had to admit that what I liked the most was usually neither designed nor made in China. We spent the better part of one day purchasing nicky nacky noos¹. I bought a lovely little bear from Hokkaido carved out of white marble with a jade fish in its mouth.



Shanghai is very polluted, actually it's exceedingly polluted. Visibility in the latter part of the day can be measured in metres. When you are in a large building the surrounding neighbourhood just disappears into the haze. Irina's apartment is near a music school. This results in a very surreal moment, where you can look out the window at a cityscape that has pretty much disappeared into the haze (gunk) and all you can hear is the sound of someone practising scales on the French Horn.

hadn't had since I was around six had started to return. Irina has been here three months and now has developed bronchial asthma, she requires her Ventolin puffer at all times.

Halfway through day one I started to get a sensation that I hadn't had since I was very young, there was a tightness in the throat and a cough. My bronchitis that I

The weather was supposed to be cold but not snowing, which just to prove me wrong it put on a -2° day. Suffice to say was particularly freezing (although I did have a bit particularly good hot chocolate with Amaretto liqueur). That night we went out to dinner to On 56 which is on that level in the Jinmao Tower where I had the best grilled salmon that I have ever had in my life. We then went on to Cloud 9 which is on level 88 and is the highest bar in the world; the view was sensational however the prices were just as stratospheric. After particularly glamorous evening we then had to queue for a taxi and the temperature had dropped even further. A couple of gentlemen speaking fluent Russian came out and started photographing the doorman who was wearing a Russian style Schapka, with the flaps down (he was Chinese, not Russian). They then turned their attention to the females in the taxi queue and realising that Irina and I could speak some Russian we were given an opportunity to have an impromptu free flirting lesson. They were from Kazakhstan, however what they were doing in Shanghai we were not able to ascertain. It was only later when we translated (okay our Russian is



a bit rusty) one or two pertinent phrases we realised that they had offered us their sexual services (jeez we really lucked out there).

On Christmas Eve we went to Irina's favourite watering hole which is an English style pub near her apartment. It was lovely and warm inside and we spent the better part of the evening with me drinking mulled wine and Irina drinking her favourite whisky and hot toddies. We chatted to James the bartender and "Panda" the owner where Irina was able to compare notes on whisky from different regions. It got to the point where the owner tested us on a whiskey that had not been opened and asked Irina to guess where it was from (at this point you need to know that Irina regularly cleans up all competition on blind whiskey tastings). The whisky was delicious, caramelly and smooth, for once Irina was stumped, the whisky was actually from Bavaria. I for one did not know that Bavaria makes whisky and would really like to get my hands on another bottle as it was enough to convert even a rum drinker like me.



On Christmas Day we went to mass at St Ignatius Cathedral which is near Irina's apartment. Amazingly the cathedral has survived the Cultural Revolution, when it was used to as a grain warehouse. The service was entirely in Chinese however Irina, being Catholic, was able to follow everything. The choir also sang in Chinese, they had particularly good voices and kept tune very well. As part of the service some small children had been dressed up as angels; they wore little cassocks and feathery wings over their heavily padded winter clothes. The overall impression was of little round white balls with feathery wings scampering around.

Outside the cathedral a nativity scene had been set up featuring a well rugged up Mary and Joseph plus painted cutouts of the animals and the model baby Jesus.



After matters spiritual we indulged in matters material, namely we went shopping for cheap souvenirs for gifts, me for Sydney and Irina for Glasgow. We went to a main souvenir shopping precinct where many of the items were remarkably similar to what you can get at Paddy's markets down in Chinatown (the prices were similar too).

When spending Christmas in foreign countries that don't have a Christmas tradition there is always that juxtaposition of how non-Christians interpret Christmas with how it is traditionally interpreted in Christian-based countries. The Christmas decorations can be particularly amusing (I am thinking Thailand here) however one of the worst components is that wherever you go the PA has a permanent loop of every dodgy Christmas novelty song of the last 60 years. Personally I have had enough of *Blizzard - The 12 Days of Christmas* and *All I Want For Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth* to last me a lifetime.

In the evening we went out for Christmas dinner with friends to a Moroccan restaurant. Our dinner companions were also expatriates: Sandy works for Westinghouse and is building a nuclear generator somewhere to the north of Shanghai; and Larsen, who is French, has done a lot of trekking especially in North Africa (including Libya). The dinner conversation was very interesting and we had a good time.

Another amazing feature of Irina's neighbourhood is the "dodgy DVD shop", which interestingly instead of stocking the usual C and D grade American rubbish has an amazing selection of European movies plus a lot of new releases and some serious art house stuff. We were able to indulge in that Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life* followed by the latest release of *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*.



Pagoda in the Garden of the Master of the Nets

I took a day tour to Suzhou which is a traditional village approximately 100 kilometres from Shanghai. Suzhou is famous for its silk manufacture, and although I did not get to see the Silk Museum (I will have to go back) it was very interesting in that it contains a number of well preserved traditional buildings. Also on my tour was an Italian family from Turin and, would you believe it - he works for FIAT (in procurement).



Traditional Half Moon Bridge featuring tour group with guide (at the front with the flag)



Old city walls with watchtower (Marco Polo was here)

What amazed me was that Shanghai with its high-rise apartment buildings, office towers and industrial areas never really stopped. We went past one chemical factory which was at least five kilometres long. It is one thing to be told

that Shanghai has over 20 million people; however it is only when you see the real size of the city that this fact starts to really sink in. I have driven through parts of Asia which were essentially an endless village however this was something different, it was an endless city.

I did the usual tourist trip to the Bund where on one side of the Huangpu River you have all the older buildings and then you turn 180 degrees to see Pudong which is all gleaming (through the haze) skyscrapers.



On my last day I went to see the Bibliotheca Zi-Ka-Wei which is near at St Ignatius Cathedral. It has an amazing selection of books, many going back hundreds of years, plus very interesting architectural features including a timber staircase and shelving. Surprisingly the library was not destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, instead it was sealed off and all the books were preserved. This is quite different from most revolutions when all books are usually burned. Even better tours of the library were free.

¹ **Nicky nacky noos**, small ornamental items of marginal utility and whose appeal depends entirely on your sense of personal aesthetics.