



Friends News

Keeping in Touch during the pandemic

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John Franklin travelled the world in the 1960s and 1970s selling British products and has worked or lived in almost 70 countries! Some of those places were far less developed than they are now and unsurprisingly John has many interesting stories to tell about those times. In fact, many years ago he began writing a book (as yet still unfinished) but here are a few extracts.

AROUND THE WORLD IN A LIFETIME

Stories of a Travelling Salesman

By John E Franklin

North Yemen in 1970

North Yemen is a country known for the stark beauty and mystery of the mountain ranges. The war with the Saudi Royalists only came to an end the previous year and I was on a mission to select a suitable location to which we could transfer our Aden business operation.

I had brought with me Mr Menon the Indian Manager of our Aden office and the plan was to acquire a vehicle and driver and travel overland visiting the major cities of Ta'izz in the south, the capital Sana'a in the north ending our journey in the Red Sea port of Al Hudaydah. Before leaving Aden I had already been warned to stock up on supplies of insect repellent sprays and was later glad to have followed this piece of practical advice.

Shortly after our safe arrival we contracted with the driver of an elderly Mercedes car to provide our transport for the next 10 days and so began the journey of a lifetime.

North Yemen is seen by some as a rugged, inhospitable country comprised in the most part of tall, knife edge mountain ranges on which the Yemeni people built their villages whilst they farm in the valleys until they reach a point where it is no longer possible to stand upright. Our journey was to take us on roads which meandered along the ranges and through village after village. Ta'izz to Sana'a is a distance of around 300 kms and along the

way we would purchase our daily supplies from the village shops, little more than wooden sheds.

Goats cheese was very popular due to the high populations of said animals but I also liked my Kraft cheese slices which were also popular and surprisingly available in most shops. One day we stopped off in a small mountain village for supplies of bread, cheese and water and found some really special offers the like of which you will never, I trust, see at your local supermarket. In response to my request for Kraft cheese the shopkeeper suggested we might like to try some hand grenades which he pulled out from under the counter! I said Kraft slices would do nicely thank you.

This chap was not one to be put off however and suggested we may prefer some rifles and ammunition instead, bear in mind the war was not long over. When these were also rejected he brought out his ultimate weapon and placed a fully active land mine on the counter. Kraft or no Kraft we were gone!

Generally the journey itself went off without too much incident, once you've got used to landing in the aircraft of the day, cars with little or no tread on the tyres hold little fear. The roads within the major cities in 1970's North Yemen were very wide mud tracks rising up from the center of the road up to the edges of the buildings.

Hotels were indeed cheap but as one might expect the facilities

matched the price. Our bedroom in the coastal city of Hodeida was devoid of furniture other than two camp beds and the toilet facilities were basic in the extreme. When I asked where the toilets were we were shown into the windowless, darkened second room. A shower rose hung from the center of the ceiling above a round hole in the floor, this opening serving for all toileting needs!

Whilst in North Yemen we were also calling on some customers several of whom placed orders for Thermos flasks from our company. In these days it was impossible for British exporters to obtain insurance cover on orders for the country and Yemeni traders often found it difficult to open Letters of Credit by which to effect payment for their goods.

As a result I agreed to accept cash payment in good old English Pounds during the course of my trip. On one sizeable order for Thermos products the buyer came to my hotel with a stack of English £50 notes. Now I have to admit that in 1970 I had not seen our note of this value and here was I about to sign a receipt for these monies. I did so and am glad to say all went well.

Many years after writing this section on my book a very dear Yemeni friend, hearing of my task, asked if he might have a copy to read to his children who had never seen the country of their fathers birth. I later heard they enjoyed the reading.

Cont ...

Thank you John for relating some stories from your globe-trotting days.

Dear Friends

If you have a story or an article to share, please forward to Lynn_ellis@btinternet.com

Abu Dhabi & The Middle East

The central market in Abu Dhabi in those days was located below ground in a series of sunken covered passageways and this was where many of my customers went for such items as toothbrushes and housewares. It was not until later years that many businesses spread out into the new high-rise shops and buildings of Sheik Hamdan Road that comprised the grid type road layout that was to follow. Given the intense heat of the summer sun this covered market arrangement was quite common in the early Middle East and one thinks of other examples of the covered arcades of Muttah, Oman and Damascus in Syria, the oldest inhabited city in the world.

As the city of Abu Dhabi developed and the pressure for space grew so it was that on one visit I heard of plans for the market to be bulldozed over. Another chapter in the life of the Middle East that was to disappear forever in the name of progress.

One area that has pro-

gressed in leaps and bounds as travel increased and which followed the explosion of wealth as oil prices tripled in 1973 was the growth in the size of airports. My recollection of that first arrival at Abu Dhabi airport in 1969 is of a small wooden hut located alongside the rather barren runway.

After stepping off the plane you walked in one door, presented your papers to the official at a small table, sorted out your cases and walked out another into Abu Dhabi. Then began the negotiations with the drivers to secure a sensible taxi fare to your hotel; thank goodness for Arabic learned from my days living in Riyadh!

It was quite interesting to start off in English just to see what level they would be seeking but when Arabic clicked in I recall that 2Dhs would be agreed quite quickly!

There were few facilities available to the traveller other than exchanging gossip with others. Sometimes

after several visits friendships would develop amongst particular customers and one chap I shall always remember for this was George Hajjar of Sultan bin Rashed and Partners. I had met George previously during my visit to Tripoli in 1966 and was to renew this contact following his move to the Gulf as construction business there really began to pick up.

I would sit in his shop on Sheikh Hamden Road discussing how many paint brushes he wanted to order and perhaps appreciating the loneliness of the traveller, and to some extent his own, he would invite me back to his flat for a meal and chat. I soon learned that like me he was a Johnny Cash fan and over the years we spent many a happy evening working our way through his record collection.

It was a very sad day indeed when I learned that George had suddenly passed away.

A MEMORABLE FLIGHT ON CONCORDE

Concorde:

a very special treat

In September 1976 I was planning one of my regular sales trips around the Arabian Gulf that included, as my first stop, a call into Bahrain.

When my travel agent came back with an itinerary he mentioned that on the day of my departure Concorde was flying to Bahrain. It seemed unlikely that I would ever get the chance again so I told them to go ahead and book my first leg on this iconic aircraft.

My seat on Flight BA301 on

27 September 1976 was 2A so I had a very clear view of the speed indicator which was mounted in the bulkhead and passengers settled in for the journey to Bahrain. Concorde was, as expected, quite narrow inside and later, having used the toilet in flight, I christened it the ladies plane. We travelled at subsonic speed until our approach to overhead Venice when we sensed the aircraft going nose up. Ten minutes after this manoeuvre com-

menced we sensed a 'push in the back' as the afterburners cut in and we began the climb to our cruising altitude which on that day was 59,000 feet (almost 18km)! We were soon looking down on the Med and noticing the curve of the horizon. With clear visibility one could see the whole of the island of Cyprus from end to end! Quite remarkable! Excellent food and in-flight service - **An experience never to be forgotten.**

China
Beijing and the
visit to
Tianjin

Our second trade show in China was held in the city of Beijing, formerly known as Peking.

On this occasion I remembered to include a good supply of toilet rolls in with the cases of exhibition materials shipped out in advance of our visit and our stand became the unofficial supplier to those in the English camp!

The exhibition followed a similar format to the previous one in Shanghai with waves of visitors and huge interest in new products and ideas. At the time our products were being used on a new hotel being constructed in a city called Tianjin located on the coast around 80 miles South East from Beijing and facing out over the Yellow Sea.

My colleague Paul and I decided it would be worth making the journey there to see how work was progressing and as a public relations exercise. Having booked 'hard seat' (second class) train tickets we duly turned up at Beijing Station only to find great difficulty in locating the platform from which our train was due to depart. By saying

Tianjin to everyone we came across we eventually found it in time to see the rear of the train pulling out of the station!

Luckily someone took pity on us and escorted us to a ticket office where a lady spoke broken English. She explained there would be another train quite shortly and changed our tickets over for us, she also gave us the correct platform number. The train pulled in, we duly boarded and took our seats facing a dining table. Shortly after two Chinese gentlemen sat in the two seats opposite to us.

Gradually the train filled up, clearly Tianjin was a popular destination. Eventually all the seats were taken and the central gangways started to fill up with famers with pigs over their shoulder and the like. Paul and I then became aware that two little old ladies were in heated conversation beside us and their comments were clearly directed our way.

When this did not have the desired result our fellow passengers started pitching in on their behalf and clearly something was amiss. It was then that I looked at our tick-

ets and noted that we had running seat numbers and they were not the same as the numbers of the seats in which we were now sitting! Oh dear.

I said to Paul we should 'play the white man' and give our seats up for the ladies which we did to their obvious pleasure. Risking not having a seat for our journey we pushed our way down the train until we eventually located the seats numbers shown on our tickets.

The seats were already occupied by two Chinese gentlemen but the minute we showed them our tickets they simply leapt out of their seats and gave them over to us. Thus began our journey to Tianjin sitting on a crowded train with lots of spitting and coughing going on all around, especially by the two fellow passengers opposite to us.

The visit to the hotel site was uneventful, work was going on well, the contractors were pleased to see us although conversation was difficult and we duly made our way back to Beijing.

KOREA

GETTING AROUND SEOUL IN THE 1970's

During the 1970's we were conducting a considerable amount of business with Korean Contractors operating throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

I would take parties from the London offices of the Korean contractors down to Italy to visit the factories to make their selections. It seemed appropriate therefore out of courtesy to visit their respective Head Offices to show both interest and appreciation of their business and to ascertain whether trade might be possible within Korea itself.

After some investigation I arrived in Seoul and spent my first morning with commercial staff at the British Embassy discussing market conditions and the plans for my visit. At one point the Commercial Officer asked how I intended to get about whilst in Seoul which I thought in my naivety was a rather strange question.

I replied that I would be using taxis as elsewhere and it was then that he introduced me to the problems peculiar to the city and that he still encountered after some 18 months in post. This despite having a Korean driver.

It transpired that at the time there were no street names or numbers, no maps of the capital and few taxi drivers or members of the local population spoke any English. In order to visit a business customer you needed to either know their location as being near the such and such famous building or area or from a previous visit. Fine unless you are in Seoul for the first time and don't speak Korean!

I was encouraged the next morning on ringing to make appointments with the various contractors to discover that they seemed aware of the problem and all but one immediately arranged a time to collect me from the hotel. The one that asked



me to attend their offices kindly gave me in detail the district and location of their premises but of course in the Korean language!

This I wrote down phonetically in English ready for my visit later in the week. Came the day of this visit I took my note down to the concierge, read it back to him as it appeared although it meant nothing to me and asked him to book a taxi to go to that address. He seemed quite happy with my first stab at Korean and read off my directions to the taxi driver who seemed equally at home with things.

With the story of the Commercial Officer ringing in my ears we set off from the hotel on what was expected to be a 20 minute journey. We travelled on through the city, stopping every now and then for him to ask directions and by the sound of things getting a variety of answers. At the end of half an hour and as I was beginning to think we would never make the appointment

he stopped for another route check and, for once, his face lit up at the reply. So off we raced and finally entered an area where we took to the side roads but still my driver looked confident.

Eventually we pulled up and he signalled in that international language that all travellers know that we had arrived at our destination. As I alighted from the taxi I could see we were parked right outside an enormous wrought iron gateway behind which lay a huge building and in the ironwork above the gates could be clearly seen, in English the heading, 'Catholic Mental Hospital'.

As I looked around for my contractors I noted a lady looking out from the windows of an upper floor of the hospital. As she caught my eye she called out to my absolute astonishment and in perfect English "You know we are all quite mad in here!" Those exact words have stuck in my mind over the years and at the time I did wonder if we outside might be the mad ones.

However it was time to try and locate my contractors office, always assuming I had got the initial directions down correctly, had transposed them into my English Korean with sufficient accuracy, had translated them back to the concierge properly and he to the taxi driver. Not much room for error! However it transpired that my phonetic work on the Korean language had worked well since the offices I required were indeed next to the Catholic Mental Hospital of Seoul and minutes later I was following up my appointment.