

Our Malaysia Trip

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Well, here's how our big adventure started. On Thursday, April 17, Kristen and I flew out from Boise to Los Angeles and waited for 5 hours for a 1:15 am flight to Taipei, Taiwan. Steve Borg, my associate, joined us and we flew together. The flight was near empty, so each of us enjoyed a whole row of 4 seats (Boeing 747), with the armrests flipped up to sleep. From Taipei, we flew to Bangkok, Thailand and then on to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia – our final destination.

The layover in Taipei was long, so we were able to explore the large airport, and enjoy the free wireless Internet access. The fact that the food vendors accepted US dollars was nice too. In fact, just about everywhere we've ever traveled, Europe included, accepts US dollars. Our itinerary had changed at the last minute, so we had to fly through Bangkok, which was an interesting experience. We didn't have a long layover, so we couldn't explore too much, but one incident was quite interesting.

Steve and I had walked down to an Internet café in the Bangkok airport to check our email, and I noticed a distinguished looking guy, with long hair and wearing expensive clothes. What was really interesting is that he was carrying a shopping bag, from one of those expensive stores, and it had his own picture on it. The first thing that popped into my head was he had got the bag printed up at one of those "we'll put your photo on anything" kiosks you see at the mall. I dared Steve to ask him what his story was -- so Steve did.

The man was Nikas Safronov (http://www.superart.ru/nicas_eng.htm) a Russian who didn't speak any English. He was friendly and, with a smile, pulled out a thick coffee-table style book of him and his artwork. The bag was from his gallery, and I guess that he is one of the most notable painters in Russia. In fact, Gorbachev had endorsed his book in the foreword, and said he was his favorite artist. His book showed hundreds of paintings, portraits, etc. that he had done, and all of them were hanging in private galleries throughout the world. Who'd have known?

When we arrived in Kuala Lumpur, we needed to rent a cab. I offered to pay, so I paid the 70 Ringgits (3.8 Ringgits to the USD) and got my taxi pass. We turned around and walked 15 feet into the arrival area, and it turns out that Microsoft had sent a car, so I dashed back in to get a refund, confusing the security folks. The car was nice, a Mercedes, but since we had so much luggage, it wasn't as comfortable as it could have been. The car took us to the Mandarin Oriental hotel, which is *right* next to the Petronas Towers.

It was a 5 star hotel and, with a nice Microsoft discount, worked out to be about \$70 US/night (SARS is also wonderful for discounts on everything over here!). We were met at the door every time we arrived at the hotel by the staff opening the doors, a slight bow, and their hand across their heart. I started doing it back to them after a couple of days. They liked that. We found that mimicking the local culture habits is both fun and appreciated. This came true when we learned to eat with a spoon and a fork (the Malay way), and got nods from our table guests. Since the culture over here is predominately Muslim, they do everything with their right hands, especially eat. Money is exchanged with the right hand. Pointing is done with the right hand, but by extending one's thumb, never the index finger. Handshakes are always with the right hand. This is because they clean their backsides with their left, and it is

rude to do anything with the left hand. The fork goes in your left hand, and you use it to push the food into the spoon in your right hand, and then you eat from the spoon only. You can also eat with your fingers, if the spoon/fork thing is confusing – that is also the Malay way.

Our room had a view of the hotel pool (which is three floors above ground) and the large park with ponds and more swimming pools right behind the towers. Our hotel building was quite intricate, so that most rooms are on a corner, and have two windows. We were on the 12th floor. The hotel has 30 floors, and the Petronas towers have 88 floors each, with towers on top, making them the tallest structures in the world (1483 feet tall) – taller than the World Trade centers were. I understand they are building a 1667 foot tall building in Taipei that should be finished in a year or two.

Steve and I would be working for the next two weeks, pretty much abandoning Kristen in the room all day long, so it was good thing that our hotel had a gym-quality exercise room, spa, sauna, massage, facials, evening turn-down service, complimentary robe and slippers, and an infinity pool (where the water drips over the edges and is re-circulated into a waterfall). The wait staff follow you to your lounge, give you ice water and suntan lotion, and even place a towel down for you. She was in heaven.

The fact that there was an enormous, five floor mall just 50' from the hotel also kept her occupied. With stores like Tiffany's, Armani, Hugo Boss, Cartier's, Tag Heuer and Versace, this was like no mall we'd ever seen. It was so large, it had two separate food courts, which, as much as we hate to admit it, we did most of our lunching there – mostly because you could see what you were going to be eating, and simply point at the not-so-wiggly dishes. We did try several new dishes and drinks. Having a large Muslim population, there were no pork products to be found. Bacon was beef, and sausages were chicken. That sounds bad, but when you consider the chicken feet we had tried, we were happy to have chicken sausage.

As far as the work, Steve Borg and I worked together to teach two different groups of Asians (Malaysians, Thai, Indonesians, Philipinos, Koreans, and Singaporeans) all of the new and wonderful features of Windows Server 2003 -- Microsoft's new server product that launched worldwide those same weeks. It was very tough work, because Steve and I hadn't seen the training materials before we arrived and there was not much more on the Web to study from. In fact, we downloaded the course and printed it out the day before we delivered the training. So, two 4-day weeks of training + a day of setup, a few sleepless nights and dozens of questions to answer, and we pulled it off with stellar ratings! Oh, and another thing that was interesting was that we got the 1st of May off as a holiday. May Day is a socialist, worker's holiday, and we had to observe it! That was a new one for me.

Microsoft's office is on the 29th and 30th floors of one of the Petronas Towers. These are the tallest buildings in the world, and where the film *Entrapment* with Sean Connery and Catherine Zeta Jones was filmed. We visited the bridge between the towers and took many photographs -- made me miss the World Trade Centers. I'm so glad I got to visit them back in the 80s. Petronas is the nations Gas company, and a quite successful one at that. I'm not sure where they rank in the global gas business, but they own about every pump station in the region. Petronas is short for "Petroliam Nasional Bhd" and one tower is strictly theirs. The other tower, the one Microsoft has offices in, is rented out. Both towers have many empty offices we were

told. The security is very strict, with metal detectors in the lobbies. Oh, and the elevators are double-stacked, so that the lower car hits the odd numbered floors, and the upper car hits the even numbered floors. On top of that, some elevators are express and only hit the upper floors. Steve and I were fortunate to have a guide show us, but Kristen had to brave it herself and had quite the time getting to our floor for a visit.

The first week of training was a big production. Microsoft had hired a company to film and tape every session Steve and I did. We tried to convince them to do that the second week (when we'd be more comfortable with the material and had run through it once), but they had already scheduled the crew. We made the best of it. One thing about teaching Asians, is that they are soft-spoken, hard to understand (in English), and don't ask too many questions. We had a tough couple of weeks. Teaching loud Americans, or most other native English speakers, can be easier because the students will jump into the conversation at times and make the training interactive, or at least feel comfortable enough to make comments or ask questions as we go along.

On our weekend and on May Day, we grabbed a cab and saw the town. We went to a pewter factory, and saw the whole process, also buying some nice pieces. The cab driver was our guide for the day. He quoted us a flat fee to show us around, and we trusted his judgment. Mr. Wong we called him (not sure if that was his first name or last, because people over here have at least four names). The prime minister has six names: "Dato Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad"

After the pewter factory, we went to the Batu Caves, which has 272 stone steps up to a gigantic cave, with Hindu shrines, sculptures, and carvings – oh, and there were monkeys – lots of them. We bought a bag of nuts to feed them, and quickly learned to keep the bag away, because they are crafty little thieves. Kristen kept them out of the bag for most of the visit, but in the end, little Marcel snagged the bag and dashed away. One of them also snatched Steve's bottle of milk and drank it. He got a milk moustache, and could've been the Dairy Council's new mascot. Steve is weird for drinking milk on such a hot day, anyway. We took some great photos and drank cold coconut juice right out of the nut. Our final stop before ending up back at the hotel was at a hand-painted silk studio. Malaysia is known for their silk and hand-painted products "Batik". We bought a couple of scarves, but there were many nice things to buy. We thanked Mr. Wong for showing us around and kept his card. We would call on him 2-3 more times during our stay, because he was nice, trustworthy, and his English was good.

We visited Chinatown and the central market on our own. Thousands of people crowd into these few city blocks to buy and sell basically whatever you can think of. What caught my eye right off, was DVD knockoffs, that play in all regions for movies that are still in the theaters. If you ask me if I bought DVDs for X-Men 2, Lord of the Rings -Two Towers, A Man Apart, The Hours, About Schmidt, Chicago, and The Core – I will probably deny it, but they were only about \$2 US each, and they even came with a groovy colored insert for your DVD cases (complete with misspellings and bad English). We learned that most of these DVDs were created by a guy in the audience with a camcorder, however.

After our last day of work, Steve's girlfriend Sinead McGuinness (yes that's her real name) arrived from Dublin, Ireland and the vacation (or holiday as everyone in the world except for Americans say) could get started. We rented a car from Wolf (which

wasn't that cheap, about like Chicago prices -- thought that was odd) and drove up North. Malaysia is an interesting country, in that it exists in two sections. The primary section is just below Thailand and is the "peninsula" (known as Peninsular Malaysia), with most of the states, including the capital Kuala Lumpur. At the southern tip of this peninsula is the city-state of Singapore, which is not part of Malaysia, after they split off in 1965. We were originally supposed to do the training in Singapore, but SARS was rampant there at the time, so it got changed to KL. They were also thinking about Australia or New Zealand (those would've been fun places too). The other part of Malaysia is the East Malaysian provinces of Sabah and Sarawak in North Borneo, over on a separate island with Indonesia and Brunei. The two Malaysian states there are governed by Islamic law (Shariah). As it is, the population of all of Malaysia is pretty well split between Indians (Hindu), Chinese (Buddhist), and Malay (Muslim). And these lucky people get every holiday from every religion in their country off. In fact, in February there are only 10 working days which **aren't** holidays, what with Chinese new year and all. Since there is no drinking allowed in a Muslim society, we learned early on that if you wanted a beer with dinner, you went to a Chinese restaurant. We didn't have to worry about that once we got to Thailand.

So, the four of us drove straight up through the middle of Malaysia, and saw some pretty heavy jungle, sometimes growing out onto the highways in places. Ok, maybe that wasn't jungle, and just a cow that Steve almost hit. It was very close, and as co-pilot I would've been the unlucky recipient of cow brains for dinner. By the way, Malaysians, just like the Thai, drive on the left side of the road, and all two lane roads are actually four lane roads, because there are always scooters driving down the outside of each lane. I drove for half of the trip myself, and it was an experience. We had Sinead with us to remind us to look right, stay in the appropriate lane, etc. I had done some left-lane, right-side-wheel driving in Ireland, so it wasn't that new for me, but the constant dodge-scooter game was a new one.

We stayed the night in Gua Musang (about midway to our coastal destination), and checked into the nicest hotel in town (read: air condition). Two rooms were around 260 Ringgits, so it was like \$34/night per couple in a really nice hotel. Steve and I took our digital cameras and trekked around town, while the girls slept after a late night singing karaoke with the local Chinese men. We definitely stood out. The locals could see blond Steve and gargantuan Rich coming from a block away, and I'm sure we were the talk of this small town.

We got back on our way and drove straight through to Kuala Terengganu ("KT" as they call it). We actually didn't drive all the way there, because I had the brilliant idea of finding a town (and a hotel) close to the boat launching point for the island we wanted to visit "Palau Redang". We found one about 20 kilometers outside of KT, and it was parking and walking distance to the boat launch. Now these rooms were rustic. For only 50 Ringgits a night (\$ 13) we got a bed, a hole in the ground with a hose (Steve explained the "Kimchee Squat" that he learned in Korea), cockroaches, geckos, and 4" spiders! You'll have to see the photos. But it was about the sleeping, not the scenery ... I kept telling Kristen.

Next morning it was all worth it, as our one hour speed boat ride to Pulau Redang revealed the most spectacular tropical island we could imagine. The waters were so clear, we could see the bottom at 50'+ from the boat, and a dolphin jumped right in front of us -- talk about good luck. We had booked a stay at the Laguna Hotel, which was the nicest on the island and had only been opened for two weeks. So, with a

strong dollar, a grand opening special, and a healthy SARS discount, it was about \$80/night for this resort -- all meals and snorkeling trips included.

Now maybe it was just me, but Kristen noticed it too -- we got the red carpet treatment at this place. We were the only Americans on this part of the island, during a bleak travel time in a new resort, so we got the rooms with the best view, the chairman of the resort met with us. It was great! We tried not to abuse it, but secretly we enjoyed the attention.

Ok, now let's get in the water ...

After all, this was why Steve and I came here, was to scuba dive (don't tell Microsoft), and with 50-100' of visibility it was worth it. These were the clearest waters I'd ever seen (8 dives in my log book), but Steve agreed (50+ dives in his log book). We started slow, by snorkeling with the other guests on a couple of boat trips to the nearby reefs and marine parks. I was actually pretty good at it, diving down 20' or more at a time to look at things on the bottom. There was a cool shipwreck (maybe 25' deep, but still poking out of the water by 5' or so) at one of the spots we visited. It was fun to dive down, holding our breath, and peek through the cracks and rusty openings at the tropical fish hiding inside the wreck. We saw many barracuda. They left us alone.

The next day, we met "Cheng", a very thin and fit Malaysian guy (actually, everyone is thin and fit over here). He spoke good English, and ran the PADI dive shop in Redang Bay, about a 3 minute walk from our hotel, around the corner. We didn't bring our dive cards with us, however, but Mr. Cheng believed us in any case, but required a shore dive with a refresher before the boat dives. We rented the gear, sized it up, no suits, just t-shirts, 6 small weights, and walked right into the water about 50' away. A few refresher exercises, and we were in about 30' seeing clown fish, 5' bumphead fish, and lots of miscellaneous colored fishes. It was great. Steve and I did a boat dive the next day, to 60'. Kristen didn't join us. She decided to stay with Sinead, who doesn't dive. Steve and I, and another fellow and Cheng went down a rope. I was the "air pig" of the group, and was out of air before anyone else - - a down side to being big. We did get to see a Moray Eel. He was cool, just hanging out of a crack, waiting to bite something. Cheng had an underwater writing board, and said that he's about 6 feet long. We had to do a 3 minute safety stop on the way back up the line.

Steve and Sinead left the next day. They would take the car and drive back to KL, and fly out a week before us. Kristen and I stayed two more days at the resort, where we did some more snorkeling, and saw sharks and squids and had a great time, which meant that our backs were extremely sunburned. We're still peeling.

Next stop for us was Phuket Beach, Thailand. We took the boat ride back to land from Redang, and were going to catch a bus to KT and fly out. We were done driving, and flights were cheap. So, to make the flight, our hotel arranged another hotel's 8am boat to take us in. There were about twelve of us and the boat driver, who I'll refer to as Einstein, because I think he forgot to fill the tanks. Our small boat stopped half way to shore, and he couldn't get us going again, so next it became a quest for a cell phone that worked out in the middle of water. Fortunately, one of the passengers got service, so our driver could call in a rescue boat. We made the plane, and hopped back to KL, waited a few hours, and then flew to the island of Phuket (pronounced Poo-Ket, before you get yourself in trouble).

Kristen and I came to conclusion that Phuket is a get-away for basically three groups: the younger/partying crowd, German tourists, and the down-and-outs from all over the world looking for an inexpensive existence. We found ourselves a little out of place with all three groups, so we did our own thing. We rented a scooter, did lots of shopping, and explored the beaches ourselves. We stayed three nights at the Burasari Hotel. The beaches and the water conditions at Phuket were not as nice as Palau Redang. We scheduled a day long boat dive to Koh Phi Phi (pronounced "pee pee") island, but we didn't make the trip. It was windy and rainy there the days we visited, so we weren't sure how the day trip would've been. Being sick of Asian food, we found ourselves at a German restaurant for three of our meals. It was a nice change, and really good food.

By now it was the 13th, and time to fly back to Kuala Lumpur to pack for our big trip home. We took a cab to our same hotel, because they were stowing our luggage for us while we traveled. We had bought four additional (cheap) duffle bags to load all of our junk to return home. It took us two hours to strategically place everything in the appropriate bag, because the breakable stuff couldn't go in the duffle bags, no bag could be too heavy, all four bags would be checked straight through to Los Angeles, and we had one more overnight in Taipei. The United States allows up to \$800 of merchandise per traveler to come into the country duty free.

Checking in at the KL airport was easier than expected. I figured we'd get the number of bags speech, or the bags too heavy speech, or the changing the tickets fee speech, but we got none of those. It was very smooth. Walking through the airport to catch the train to our gate, we saw it ... Chili's Restaurant with a special on fajita nachos! We were in heaven and ordered two plates, and were late getting to our gate, but we didn't care. It was food from our homeland, and we were going to enjoy it.

Arriving in Taipei, Taiwan that night was an experience. Taiwan had avoided SARS for most of our trip, but then started to really get hit with cases a few days before we flew through there. Yuck. When we touched down, there was medical staff waiting for us to take our temperature and have us walk by thermal cameras and everything. It was serious. We had to submit written health evaluations wherever we flew in southeast Asia, but this was the first time our temperature was taken. We had the lady at the counter help us get a hotel, converted some Yankee dollars to Taiwan bucks and jumped in a cab. We were just ready to be home, so this last night at a hotel was kind of a nuisance. We wanted to just stay at the hotel by the airport, but the government had requisitioned it for SARS quarantine cases. That being the situation, we didn't mind the twenty minute drive to town. Checking into the Monarch Hotel (Taiwan is not as cheap as where we'd been), again with the temperature check - this time on the forehead, instead of the ear and then we were given gold stickers to show other guests and staff that we were safe!

The next day was Thursday, and we were to leave at 4:40 pm to Los Angeles. Well, at about 3:50 pm, I had to go to the bathroom, right then! I headed down the main hall and found one of the man/woman signs pointing down a side hallway, and found the men's was out of service, so I kept heading down the hall until I found another sign. It pointed down a similar side hallway, so I followed it, and found myself in the Cathay Pacific lounge, with a restroom. I played dumb and went right in, because that's where the signs directed me, and I hadn't missed any bathrooms. Well, the toilet Nazi came running around the desk, chased me into the men's bathroom, and

even into the stall to demand to see my boarding card. Looking back, I could've handled the situation so much more creatively in the event that it was a semi-emergency, but I decided to just pull up my pants and leave. I was definitely ready to be back in the states.

On the plane ride back to Los Angeles, the plane was fairly full, and I was assigned a middle seat between Kristen and a Buddhist monk. At the first opportunity, I excused myself for another set of open seats in the way back. After an hour or so, Kristen joined me, not because she was cramped, but because she was sitting next to man who is forbidden to touch, or be touched by a woman. He also could not take anything from her, or pass anything to her, so it was quite uncomfortable.

After another 6 hour layover, we finally made it back to Boise, on the same day we left. We got a taxi and it was heaven when we finally walked into our apartment, our own bed. Yes, we enjoyed our vacation immensely, but were ready to be home. We were grateful to be in our own house, with a wonderful, memorable experience behind us.

Keep your eye on www.hundhausen.com for our digital photos, once we get them updated.