

Stories from the Shed: Experiences of Cultures and Languages

Tvede, Kim (2020)

- **Story-teller's** cultural background: **Danish-Australian**
- **Categories:** Rural/Urban, Travel, Unexpected outcomes
- Kim's stories of intersecting histories, cultures and languages show some of the experiences one can have when one plays with using the local language (or not, in some instances).

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Experiences of Cultures and Languages

Kim Tvede

The following stories and sub-stories, twelve stories in all, are all selected as ones I have told before, and each at some point illustrates the interesting experiences that can be enhanced when one *'has a go'* at the culture or language of the local people. The stories can be read separately and individually as they are not connected – the sub-stories experiences connect through their travel experience.

Story 1 – Early Pivotal Experiences

As recent immigrants in Australia in the 1950s, we had our first experience of Australian hospitality at a neighbour's get-together party in Salt Street, Woolloowin. We, that is, my parents, sister and I were invited to a party on a Saturday evening, and we should also *'bring a plate'*. We duly got dressed up as we would have for a social event in Denmark, and brought a plate, which we thought rather strange that someone might not have enough crockery for a fairly smallish social gathering of around twenty people.

We were thereby inducted into Australian culture in the 1950s, where women dressed in stockings and gloves to go to town, in our case, to buy good ground coffee. *Allan & Stark* in Queen Street was the only store with a machine that could grind coffee finely enough for the drip-strained coffee pots we were used to from Denmark.

It seemed however, the reverse dress standard was expected for a social gathering. My father quickly shed his coat and tie, and my mother changed out of high heels. And the plate – well, I think we found something to match the cheese and ham

sandwiches, meat pies, sausage rolls, etc others brought on their plates, but I am pretty sure it was not the dense rye sourdough bread, pickled raw fish, fried fish roe, smoked eel or really smelly *Esrom* cheese we were used to eating. It also took a while for the local butcher to realise these crazy migrants were stuffing and eating ox-heart and made jellied beef tongues and were not just feeding them to the pets. When they did realise this, the price went up.

I recall in *Grade 5 at Mount Gravatt Upper State School in Social Studies*, learning English history as a precursor to understanding how British history linked to Australian history. In this subject, we learned about a foolish Viking king *Canute* who thought himself so omnipotent that he could command the tide to stop flowing in. Even as a ten-year-old that did not resonate for me. How could a sea-faring Viking not understand, in detail, what the local tides would do? It did not make sense.

I undertook some historical cultural fact-finding of my own. If anyone wants to know the story of why *King Knud*, then king of much of England, but it really was not England at that point, it was part of the kingdom of Denmark, found himself with his court in the middle of a long narrow inlet with the tide coming in, I can tell you.

The tale is of a very wise king teaching his court a lesson on the limits of royal power, and the inevitability of laws of nature impacting on unjust treatment of subjects that would lead to insurrection. It seems the way history is told depends on by whom and why it is told.

It was also in primary school I found no other Danish students, but there were Swedish-speaking Finnish students and we found that we could explore our languages with the '*special power*' of

knowing another language or two. My Italian neighbours also had this skill in their families. There were also Greek, Polish, Dutch, Chinese and Aboriginal kids I knew of.

These pivotal experiences influenced me through life, and when mainstream or social media, extremists or isolationists cast stereotypes as culminating truths, I think back to the great unsung power of Australian multiculturalism – the State Education system, and the opportunities it gave to experience people as individuals from so many continental and island nations.

I realised that friendship is based on common interests, not skin colour, faith, culture, history or language; that common respect and courtesy can carry the day; and that regardless of background or politics, most people just want a comfortable and healthy existence with their families to celebrate and enjoy life. Basic common interests, and experiencing the differences, just makes life more interesting.

706 words

Story 2: 1980 - Denmark and England

Busy gathering money for a house deposit, and getting on with other parts of our lives, like Uni study and work mainly, we didn't do much travelling beyond local vacations until the 1980 Xmas school vacation period, when we decided for me to revisit my place of birth and life-partner, Maxine, to experience Danish culture and my extended family at home. Our first overseas trip together, if you don't include camping on Stradbroke Island. We booked Brisbane to Copenhagen. Tickets were \$1200 each. In relative value compared to today, plane travel was a lot cheaper in the early 21st century than in 1980.

Sub-story 2.1 - Denmark

We flew into Copenhagen. Getting off the plane, we transitioned into customs. The officers seemed to take a big interest in our luggage, including the stuffed koala toys for young family members. One officer was saying, in Danish, to the other, *“This luggage is just like that we picked up with the drugs from Bangkok last week.”* When they seemed about to tear the stuffing out of a koala toy I said, in Danish, *“Be so kind as to take care of that, a child is waiting for it.”* They nearly had a heart-attack. They went back to my Australian passport and looked at my place of birth, Copenhagen. They clearly had assumed nobody could understand them.

We got our luggage intact, but as they were finishing, one officer said, again in Danish, *“Have you done your National military service.”... “Nej.”... “Well then don’t overstay your 3-month tourist visa, or you could find yourself in the military instead of going home, your blood is Danish, no matter what your passport says.”* I didn’t test that claim (though verified later that I did not have dual citizenship).

When we walked outside at the airport for the first time it was minus 2 degrees Celcius, and to breathe hurt our lungs, but our relatives just laughed. Three weeks later we had no troubles and took our jumpers off when the temperature reached 6 degrees, and I bemoaned that my feet had started to sweat again and made my socks smelly. We had become used to minus 8 degrees as normal – below minus 12 was cold.



That language issue arose another time. We went to the *National History Museum* and in the courtyard in the centre of the building were replicas of the *Jelling Stones*, the burial memorials *Harald Blue-Tooth* had commissioned for his father, *Gorm the Old* and his mother *Tyr*. The *Jelling Stones* are hugely significant for Danes and they are often referred to as Denmark's birth certificate since the various kingdoms of Denmark were unified under Gorm, who became the first overall king. A position strengthened by Harald when he introduced Christianity to further bind his allies.



We had, by then, been to Jelling and seen the actual stones, but the museum ones were coloured so you could see the markings more clearly. I really wanted a picture of them. However, the sign said '*Gaarden er lukket paa grund af is*', which means, '*The*

courtyard is closed due to ice', referring to the icicles hanging from the roofline above. Falling icicles are a known hazard.

I really wanted a picture, so I spoke to the guard, in Danish. In the course of the conversation he referred to the guard at the '*garderobe*'. I had no idea what that was. He appeared quite taken back that I would not know what a '*cloakroom*' was. I then explained that I had left Denmark when four-years old, and perhaps it was not a word I had been exposed to.

Well, the guard was so impressed with my Danish skills that he took me to the guard at the '*garderobe*', explained the situation, and asked me to ask again, in Danish, so they could listen to my

dialect and language more closely. I did. The cloakroom guard then said, in Danish, *“I have a relative in Australia, might you know him”* ... *“Where does he live?”* ... *“In a place called Elizabeth”* ... *“Hmm, that’s like Copenhagen to Rome from my place, what’s his name?”* He told me. ... *“You know, I actually think I might know him.”* We got access to take the photo.

When we went to the Catholic cathedral with the external staircase running around the steep tower, and which had been my father’s family’s cathedral, there was a similar sign saying access to the tower was closed. I didn’t push my luck.



We had a great time staying with relatives in Copenhagen, and then an Aunt and her husband, in Esbjerg, three hundred kilometres west on the Atlantic coast. At their place we borrowed bicycles (Maxine does not really feel safe on a bike) and rode down to the harbour, on old, wet cobble stones. Maxine only managed it, I think, because she had a following wind pushing her along. Coming back, we elected to walk the bikes.

Esbjerg looks older than it actually is and it revolves around the port. It was built to give Danish traders direct access to the Atlantic and thus an advantage over Hanseatic towns in Germany whose traders had to enter the Baltic to trade. To attract settlers, the king insisted the town be given an air of permanence and stability, so, for example, the town water tower looks like a medieval fortified watch tower. An interesting place.



Maxine and my uncle's wife attended the Boxing Day sales. A time of absolute bedlam. They became separated, but that didn't stop Maxine. Using key words she had picked up, she managed to successfully communicate in a sort of pidgin Danish. There is no stopping Maxine when there is a sale on.

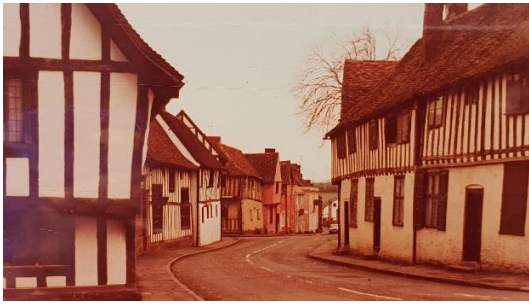
Later, in Odense on the island of Fyn which has a different dialect, we visited Hans Christian Andersen's home.

Following that, we were at a party back in Copenhagen and Maxine asked another guest, *"Where in Fyn do you come from?"* ... *"I did not know you spoke Danish!"* ... *"I don't know the words, but I recognise the melody."* That impressed folk.

Being in Denmark at Xmas time is quite special. All those winter Xmas cards one sees, with candles in windows, etc, that's Denmark at Xmas. Also decorations with real candles in real spruce trees, and everyone in good humour in the cold, as well as the appropriateness of the traditional Xmas foods and mulled wine drinks. Then the ritual of burning the tree on New Year's Eve to symbolise renewal into the new year (a bit of the pre-Christian festival of *Jul* still evident there, methinks), along with fireworks.

I reckon I left Australia with an Australian wife, and came home with one at least a de-facto Dane.

Sub-story 2.2 - To England



We had family friends in Suffolk, England. They were both artists specialising in water colour painting. Tony especially, being originally from England, had found the Australian light too harsh a contrast. They moved to the village of Lavenham, near Bury-St-Edmunds. We were invited to visit, so we explored options and found the cheapest way to get to London from Copenhagen was via a group called 'Magic Bus', using chartered buses.

It sure was magic. When we turned up at central station in Copenhagen to catch a bus, a company representative appeared to tell us there were not enough passengers for a bus charter. We were to be provided rail tickets to Hamburg and regular bus tickets from Hamburg, through to Zeebrugen in Belgium for a vehicular ferry to Dover, then bus on to London. *"The train departs platform 21 in twenty minutes. You must hurry"...* *"Excuse me, where is the bus in Hamburg? How do we get to it?"* ... *"The international bus depot is around the corner from the train station in Hamburg."*

Off we went on an express train that went through Lolland in Denmark then the train loaded onto a ferry to Peenemunde in Germany. It was to stop in Lübeck and then Hamburg before going on express to Lake Constance in Switzerland, where a lot of people went skiing. We had second-class tickets.

Looking for seats in second class, we found them over-subscribed, so went into first class. A couple of Israeli guys also did the same thing. We found seats that had some dour Swedes

headed for Lake Constance for skiing. They seemed not to like the second-class invasion so relocated to another cabin. In Denmark that was not a problem.

When we entered Germany, the train was broken up and re-assembled. Customs police, with MP5 machine guns, and a rail ticket inspector came around to check passports and tickets. In a good impersonation of Colonel Klink from *Hogan's Heroes*, the inspector announced, *"These are second-class tickets. You are in first-class. You must move!"* ...I quickly assessed this was not the time to practice my high school German-speaking capability... *I'm sorry, you must be mistaken, these are the seats we have been in from Copenhagen.* ... *"This is a first-class cabin! You cannot be here!"* ... *"I am sorry, these look like second-class seats in Danish trains."* ... *"You must go!"* and the inspector and his submachinegun-bearing escort moved on. Knowing there were no seats elsewhere, we might have stayed.

Nightfall, and we agreed with the Israelis to convert the seats to beds and retire. One Israeli said to the other, *"Who stands first watch?"* I think they were either military or recently had been military. They still looked fit and had short hair. There had been a train-hijacking in The Netherlands by Algerian terrorists, and there were posters of wanted urban terrorists displayed in German train stations, so being alert was not an entirely paranoid concept.

In the middle of the night, we were woken by the train stopping and lots of noise and military-style vehicle movement. I looked out the window to see fields, not a platform, in the drizzling weather. Initially I said to Maxine, *"First sign of shooting and we get out the window, drop to the tracks and roll off into the field until able to hide."* But the train started erratic stop-start

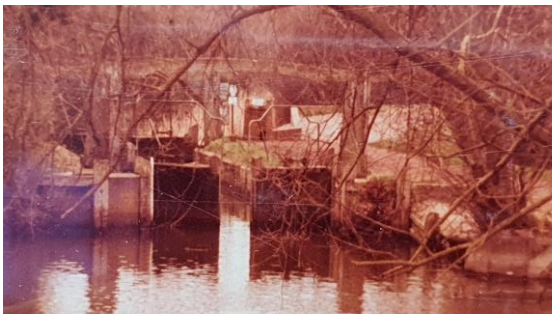
movement, this went on for some time, and before it finished we went back to sleep. The next time we awoke we were at a rail station. *“Where are we?”* said Maxine. ... *“First station, must be Lübeck.”* Looking out the window, Maxine said, *“So what does H-A-M-B”* ... *“Maxine, get our gear, and out now before the train goes and we end up in Switzerland!”*

At 6am in Hamburg, Maxine needed to go to the toilet. The large *frau* in charge wanted two deutschmarks to enter the toilet. We had 100DM in a single note (about \$40AUD). She had no change. I went into a café and ordered, *“Ein bier, bitte.”* A beer appeared and was opened. I put the 100DM note on the counter and the beer disappeared. He had no change either. I went to a lady opening her delicatessen, *“Ein Stück Käse, bitte.”* I paid for my 500 grams of cheese and got change. Maxine went to the toilet, and reported it was so clean one could eat in there, but we saved the cheese for later. Now to find the bus around the corner.

Hamburg railway station takes a whole city block, with exits on four sides, so the question was, *“Around which corner?”* I will never again forget the German word for ‘corner’ – ‘Ecker’, like I did at that time. Not enough time to explore before the bus was scheduled to depart. We took up with a Dutch bloke, Dolf, who was also seeking the same bus. We got directions and found the international bus depot, and about 200 buses lined up in lanes. Which lane? Five minutes to departure time.

We took a lane each to search, and Maxine and I responded to Dolf’s call. We happened on him standing in front of our bus, arms outstretched, preventing the driver from slavishly following his timetable. If you want to stop a stubborn Dutch bus driver, it’s good to have an equally stubborn Dutchman standing in his way.

We caught the bus through Germany and Belgium and onto the big ferry, straight into a force-5 gale, with waves as high as the lifeboat deck. Other than that we got to London and drove through Brixton without seeing a white face for over thirty minutes. We found the train to Lavenham without too much difficulty. The only mistake was buying a British Rail *Scottish pie*. Singularly terrible and insufficiently thawed. My view on that sort of pie remained negative until Inverarry, 2017, near the Duke of Argyle's castle, when we had a lovely Scottish (lamb) pie from a waterfront bakery.



We had a lovely time with our friends. We explored Suffolk through visiting the sites of those John Constable paintings like, '*Flatford Mill*', where the oaks were thicker than in the painting, and '*The wain crossing*',

where the road was now paved with bitumen, as well as the country churchyard grave of Mary Hamilton, who became famous in a folk song, and had met her demise when she '*bore a baby small to the highest one of all*'. On returning to London to go back to Denmark, we had a day going around the



Monopoly board sites and visiting the Tower of London. I got as far as seeing what looked like Shackelton and later Scott's, '*Discovery*' in the distance on the Thames, but no closer. I thought I recognised it from my ship-model I had built as a boy. It was closed in 1979 for reconditioning and moving to Dundee as a

ship and Antarctic museum. I had previously assumed it lost in the ice. Perhaps it was not the 'Discovery' at all.

2462 words - Kim Tvede (2020)

Story 3: 2001 - Our legacy of 9/11

Our middle daughter was on German high-school-exchange in *Traunstein* in *Bavaria* after the planes hit the twin towers in New York. The USA response evolved and we received a phone call in December from said daughter, "*We are booked on Malaysian Airlines with a stopover in Kuala Lumpur on the way home. It's a Muslim country. What happens if we are at war by then? I don't want to be interred*" Maxine and I felt that was too big an issue for a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl to have to deal with alone.

Maxine had recently had surgery. She could not travel. It was the summer when bushfires were rampant all over the place in Australia, but mostly down south. Our eldest daughter was working and studying. We decided to split the family and have one of us in Europe and the other at home in Australia, to deal with whatever may arise. We communicated with our girls' school and arranged that instead of travelling with the school group, our fourteen-year-old youngest daughter would accompany me on a trip to visit family in Denmark, and Inge would fly from Germany up to Copenhagen and stay with us until we all departed for a return flight at the end of the school vacation.

Off we went. For most places I gave said daughter a copy of the local *Dorling Kindersley* DK travel guide and asked her to plan where we should go and what we should do. She did a very conscientious job of that. She still does.

Essentially, we visited family and played tourist. For Xmas, she decided she would make a *pavlova* dish as a contribution to the food fest that Xmas generally is, and found one could not buy the pre-mix for the meringue as we can in Australia – it was made from scratch after an urgent call to Maxine to get instructions.

For the actual *Xmas Eve* dinner, she was surprised that the food was entirely familiar since we had maintained that tradition throughout our time in Australia. The only real difference was the components, including pre-mixed creamed almond rice pudding, *risalamande*, and also *mulled wine* were simply purchased. No need to make them from scratch like we did in Australia.



On *Anden Juledag* (Second Xmas day - *Boxing Day* in Australia) extended families often have a long lunch feast, with everyone bringing a contribution. With twenty people, that's ten couples generally, that's ten courses, and alcohol to match. These lunches take many hours of socialising while sitting at a table and partaking of conversation, food and drink.

It would be a challenge for youngest daughter as she spoke next to no Danish. Most of the other guests had some level of English but most not enough for an extended casual conversation across a range of topics. We arrived, and the alcohol was placed on the external verandah where beer needed checking regularly to ensure it didn't freeze. *Akvavit* and other spirit drinks did not need checking as they simply had too much alcohol content to freeze. Wine stayed inside at room temperature (21 degrees with central heating).

In Danish tradition we were seated on the same side of the table but not together so we could not easily see our normal companions and were thus encouraged to socialise with others.

I had cautioned said daughter beforehand that the meal would be very long, and one needed to pace oneself so as to be able to sample everything, and especially be careful with any alcohol offered. Oh, and it was entirely likely that we may be asked to sing. Danes have all sorts of songs and also sung or rhyming drinking toasts, so we needed to have a song ready if asked.

The event was progressing nicely, and then I noticed a drink being passed around which is made by adding '*Tykisk Peper*' - '*Turkish pepper*' liquorice to vodka and letting it dissolve over several days into a drink not dissimilar to *Sambucca*. It is colloquially known as '*sorte-svin*' (black swine). It is quite sweet, and very drinkable, and said daughter was setting up to try it before I saw what was happening.

The people around her were not so competent in English so as to engage in deep conversation, so instructed her in a '*skaal*' ritual rhyme as a social/cultural connection. We had a conversation reminding her to 'pace' and decline any *sorte-svin*. She had fully under-estimated its alcoholic nature and had thought it a flavoured 'lolly water'. We got through '*I Come From the Land Downunder*', I think, with the help of many who knew it as an international hit song, or it might have been '*Waltzing Matilda*'.

When our eldest daughter later travelled to Denmark alone after finishing university, I recommended she learn the Slim Dusty song, '*I'd like to have a drink with Duncan*' for her obligatory Aussie song when requested. She declined, but later told me I

was right and should have spent some time with what would have been very appropriate for the occasion.

This trip however, youngest daughter had a keen desire to see her first squirrel. The house had a big picture window overlooking the backyard. While we were eating breakfast, suddenly there was a squirrel moving quickly and erratically across the snowy ground, as squirrels do. The young Aussie daughter squealed, “*Squirrel!*” and took off to the back door and outside. Off she went in about 30 centimetres of snow in her pyjamas and bed socks. Our family hosts were shocked that she would go outside so inappropriately dressed. When the cold permeated she finally came back inside to thaw out and dry her clothing.

Sub-story 3.2 – to Norway

When middle daughter joined us we booked an overnight ferry trip to Oslo, Norway. The food was wonderful on the ferry, and we had a lovely day exploring Oslo, including the *National Art Gallery* and *Wielandparken*, with all the myriad of statues from the *Art Nouveau* period by the one sculptor. Then we caught a bus around the inlet to the *National Folk Museum* which has a lot of re-located traditional Norwegian buildings and a large section on the reindeer-herding *Saami* people.

Right next door was the *Viking Ship Hall*, where a number of excavated and preserved Viking ships are displayed, including the wonderfully ornate *Oseberg* ship - the one with the curly bow and stern stems. There was a shop just before one exited, and the girls decided they would like to buy a timber model boat kit each. We also decided we would like to see the Thor Heyerdahl and Amundsen’s *Fram* exhibits but were not sure of the directions, so it was decided I would ask the checkout lady.

Independently each daughter approached the checkout with their goods. When served, they each said, in Danish, "*Mange tak for det (many thanks for that).*" And the attendant responded in English, "*You're welcome.*"

When I approached the counter and asked, in Danish, for directions, she gave them to me in Norwegian. I was chuffed, "*Yes! I can still speak like a native speaker!*" I got to the girls waiting outside. "*Did you get directions for where we have to go?*" I told them the route. They were silent for a moment, then laughed. "*What's so funny?*" ... "*You just told us exactly what she told you.*" ... "*Yes, so what?*" ... "*You told us in Norwegian! Now say it in English please*"

Visiting the Danish Atlantic west coast, at *Esbjerg*, we took a small ferry across the harbour to the island of *Fanø*. There we hired bicycles to explore the island which was about as big as Bribie Island, I think, and with a small town at each end and farms and forests in between. At the bike-hire place we were told we were not permitted to take the bikes onto the beach. "*Why on earth would anyone want to ride in sand?*", we commented.

When we got to the beach, it was very wide, very sandy, and frozen. Cycling on it would have been simple. It squeaked when one walked on it. The Atlantic seafoam, when we came up to it at the water's edge, was also frozen and crumbled. For *Game of Thrones* fans, the forests still had face-carvings on trees and stumps reminiscent of the 'old' religion. Kind of spiritual really, without specifying which spirits.

We also spent a day on the mainland on the coast, with heather, dune grasses and heath growing adjacent to really dark aboreal spruce pine forests.



In the beach dunes were the bunkers left by the Nazis as part of their Atlantic defensive barrier. There had been a storm the night before and the girls were keen to find 'Rav'-Amber on the beach, which is usually brought up by

wild seas. The wind was still blowing and the temperature around *minus-16*, as well as sleeting.

I said to the girls that I would stay in a bunker and watch them while sheltered from the wind, and that they should keep checking their nose and ears, and when they could not feel them, get back into cover quickly before they became frostbitten. *"Oh, and if you meet someone on the beach, speak German."* ... *"Why?"* ... *"Because in this weather, any Dane is going to be inside, and anyone outside will be a German who is on vacation and won't let the weather upset their daily walk on the beach."* They met a lady. She was from Hamburg in northern Germany, and they had a good conversation, in German, which I eventually joined. They found amber, and we had it mounted in a jewellery shop in the nearby town.

On our stopover in Singapore on the way home, we caught a bus to a residential area on the opposite side of the island in order to take a hike up through a national park trail to the top of the lookout on *Bukit Timah*. Getting off the bus, we walked

through a park with big trees. We were sharing a melting *Toblerone* chocolate bar.

A monkey appeared and was sitting quite cutely. Youngest daughter accidentally dropped a bit of chocolate and the monkey pounced on it, then the world erupted. Out of all the trees came an avalanche of monkeys. We might have said, “*Throw the chocolate and run!*” We did, and got to the other side of the park to see a sign. ‘*Do not feed monkeys, fine \$15000*’. Singapore is a fine city, but rabies from a monkey bite is worse.



-1762 words - Kim Tvede (2020)

Story 4: 2012 - China for work

My school had changed from its foreign language of German to Mandarin Chinese. The Chinese government was sponsoring trips to mainland China to educate the managers of programs for the 20-million people worldwide who had made the first step of learning Chinese language, to also understand the history and culture of mainland China and its governance.

At that time, the teacher education program and student results in Shanghai and Jiangxu province were seen as the peak Chinese school teaching methodologies producing good results compared to Australian students. There was Departmental support in Queensland for learning more about this method, and a general interest in links with China. In 2012 I applied and was accepted for a September vacation study tour of Jiangxu province, Shanghai and Beijing. There were only five Principals and Deputy

Principals participating in the tour. We had a Chinese manager who briefed us on protocols and etiquette before departure, and accompanied us on the tour.

In China we had local guides and an interpreter provided by the Jiangsu education department. The program was basically official school and administrative meetings and visits in the mornings and 'cultural understanding' excursions in the afternoons. Really these were guided tourist visits to significant places that explained Chinese culture and history – We even visited the site of SunTzu's training of the emperor's concubines, a famous story of the author of *'The Art of War'*. Our guides were very knowledgeable and required assessable accreditation to do their jobs.

Sub-story 4.1 - A banquet with colleagues – a cautionary tale

There was a variation to our tour in Shanghai. One of our party had prior a connection in Shanghai. She wanted to re-connect. A lunch banquet was arranged. This was early in our tour and we were not yet fully accustomed to the process of a meeting to introduce people and describe roles and interests, followed by a banquet lunch where the host (Boss) determined seating positions around a round table, alternating host and visiting people, and where business was negotiated. Position at the table also determined relative priorities somewhat. Mostly these were polite, friendly and just a bit structured. On this occasion though, there was no pre-planned agenda and it felt more like colleagues enjoying each other's company.

We were also inducted into a customary ritual of successive toasts. *"Ganbei!"* I never realised before that this meant a *'Skaal – bottoms up!'* Anyway, you consume a lot of alcohol. From my

Scandinavian background I was a little more familiar with this toast-drinking behaviour than most Australians, but we all got a bit tipsy. It was a learning experience in many ways. I believe the Australian wine industry took a hit when the Chinese government changed its views on this particular ritual.

After an absolutely delightful lunch, and with gifts of even more yellow-wine as we exited the door, we got onto our minibus for a two-hour drive out of the city and on to the next city of Suzhou. As we drove along I found myself looking for rest-stops. All that alcohol had been processed and needed to get out. I heard a colleague ask how long to the next stop. I figured I was not the only one with a fluid problem.

The pain in the bladder got worse and was getting to my teeth. I was starting to think about asking the driver to pull up to the side of the four-lane-each-way highway when my colleague said he was sorry, but if we did not stop soon he was going to embarrass himself in the bus. Some minutes later we pulled into a rest-stop and parked beside a mulberry plantation (Suzhou is a silk-producing area). Two of us bolted off the bus, ran for the trees, and found ourselves dodging lots of toilet paper. Clearly this place had been used for our intended purpose many times before. When we got back on the bus there was general amusement, and a consideration that we had 'broken the ice' and strengthened the bonds of our tour team in a very Australian way. My teeth had returned to normal.

Who needs a phone?

Suzhou is known as *Venice-of-the-East*. It has many canals. I was carrying a work telephone, mainly as a time-piece as I had not installed a local or global sim. In the twilight, and admiring the



traditional buildings, I sat on a seat beside a canal. We were through-walking about 1.5 kilometres to appreciate the environment. It was like a historical movie set, very pictureque.

I heard a clatter, but did not realise I had dropped my phone until sometime later. By then I had realised that if we were not happy for any reason whatsoever, our Chinese hosts took it as a reflection on their poor management. I had a sense that if I reported my phone as missing right there and then, when we were on a tight schedule, they would become distressed, so I said nothing until sometime later when it was noticed I had to ask for the time from others. I then had to explain my loss while assuring our hosts that it was unfortunate, entirely my fault, and I was not concerned.

It meant I was in China with no means of communication if I got separated from the group, and no way of telling the time. I had intended to purchase a new *Tissot* watch on the way out of China, duty-free, in Hong Kong, so had no watch other than on the telephone.

It was actually quite liberating being totally free and being out of contact with the rest of the world. There were a couple of times where I became separated from the group for a little while, but

nothing that was going to cause a panic, though our Chinese escorts may have had a different perspective on that. They seemed relieved when we re-connected.

Sub-story 4.2 - Playing with language

I did get to practice my Chinese. Working on my general approach when travelling overseas, I had learned some basic phrases provided by the Chinese language-teachers at school before we departed. The teachers had even given me a Chinese name. My Scandinavian family name, finishing with the letters 'de' totally escaped them and the best they could come up with was 'De' (*forthright and moral*). 'Kim' was a bit foreign, and they seemed reluctant to give me a Korean name, so I told them I had a 'chop' for ink-stamping my signature dragon character given to me by a Chinese friend based on my year, month, fortnight and day of birth – all 'dragon'. I was named by the teachers as 'Jun Long' (*Wise Dragon*). My business card had this name in Romanised and Chinese characters.

The various officials we met were most impressed with the 'Jun Long', less so with the 'De'. They also seemed pleased at my efforts to use and learn more stock phrases. "Oh, Jun Long, your Putonghua (Mandarin) is very good." Did I mention that culturally Chinese interaction is generally polite and if a problem occurs, they can be quite obtuse? They don't like to give bad news.

The time came when I sat down with some Year four students who had been learning English for longer than I had been learning Chinese, but we all had only progressed to stock phrases. I practised my phrases that seemed appropriate to the situation ... silence ... The student I had directed the comment to looked at me, then at the group around him ... lots of chatter,

then they came back to me and gave me the correct articulation for what I had tried to say, and coached me quite well... If you want an honest opinion, ask the kids, they are way less inhibited by polite face-saving culture.

Sub-story 4.3 - QiGong in the street.

Our manager noted he was very much looking forward to showing us *Tianenmen Square* in Beijing when we got there as it was very impressive. An interesting conversation followed. We did eventually visit the Square, which was magnificent and totally enormous, as was the adjacent *Forbidden City* which we then visited. The *Ming tombs*, *Great Wall* and *Temple of Heaven*, together with a wander through a traditional residential district *hutong* with its *siheyuan* courtyard compounds, and an independent stroll through a district 'wet' market before breakfast at our hotel, were all memorable.



However, I will most recall a little old lady who I saw on the footpath early one morning before the city and my colleagues really woke up. She was by a street tree, and began some *QiGong* strength, flexibility and breathing exercises that complement *TaiChi*. Without any other communication, I selected an adjacent tree, and began to emulate her moves. She gave no indication that she knew I was there, but at the end, she smiled at me and I bowed.

The next morning I lined up as per the day before, and we repeated the experience. The third day I was a little later coming down – she was waiting for me before starting. I was uplifted by

the humanity of it all. A little connection, with no shared language, and in the midst of a city of multiple millions of people, we had a relationship based on the simplest of experiences. A high point of the trip. I see that lady still whenever I exercise, or even reflect on that time. I wonder what she did the rest of the day?

1620 words - Kim Tvede (2020)

Story 5: 2016 – Italy and Germany hunting differences

We were travelling in Autumn through Northern Italy as part of exploring the places we had heard of in school history and various other sources that one learns about along the way. After flying in from Zurich, we spent time exploring Rome and the many movie and documentary sites we knew of, and a few we didn't. We followed this with a trip down to Napoli and across to Capri, then Pompeii. Fascinating, and we improved our understanding of contemporary and historical Italy, including the famous *WWII* attack on Monte Cassino, amongst the many older stories.

After time on the Ligure coast and the home of Christopher Columbus, and exploring the isolated villages in CinqueTerre, as well as Florence, we departed for Lake Magori. Driving parallel to the Alps, crossing the 2000 year-old *Appian Way* from when all roads led to Rome, spending a little time in Verona, and seeing the specially constructed '*Romeo and Juliette*' balcony made to satisfy tourists who kept asking where it was, other than a figment of Shakespeare's imagination.

Moving on, we passed through smaller villages with more wild forests visible. The scrubby growth was quite dense, and we started to understand how wild boar could still be viable survivors, raiding farm crops and lambs. Hunting season was opened recently, and we saw hunters on foot, gun dogs such as the old *Bracco* hounds at their side or scenting game. We asked whether bear were still around. We were told, *“Not really, but there was one some years ago. It just went about its business and everyone was pleased it was still surviving and just gave it a wide berth, so it was not really a problem. Then it wandered over the border into Bavaria in Germany. Hunters there shot it, and it is preserved in a museum in Munich. Sad.”*

We went on with our trip, and after time in Venice, flew out to spend time in Paris, and then worked our way over to Amsterdam, which we had visited before, and later joined a boat trip on the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers, through The Netherlands, Germany, Austria and finished at Budapest in Hungary. Along the way we took a side trip to an old hilltop walled medieval town, Rothenburg, that used to be on a trading route, but when the route changed, the town remained as it was, so was a great example of the old period. We had a guide explaining absolutely everything as we went along. He seemed to think that if he was quiet he was not working.

Travelling through rural landscape with fields and forests, we noticed small lookout towers adjacent to market garden fields and beside forests. We were told that they were *‘hides’* for hunters. Hunting was allowed all year round, and the towers were located near crops that wild boars liked to eat. Farmers generally built the *‘hides’* and then leased them for exclusive use by hunters, sometimes for years.

As part of discussion, the guide proudly announced that hunters had even killed a fierce wild bear. It was now called ‘Bruno’ and able to be seen in a museum in Munich.

I contemplated this for a moment, then considered that by this time I found the guide somewhat parochially annoying, and we were not really ever likely to meet again, so I said, “*You know, in Italy we heard about this bear and that it was considered a bit of a natural treasure. They were quite upset when it wandered over the border and was shot.*” ... The guide was silent for a whole five minutes after that. I probably didn’t do much for international relations between Germany and Italy, but it did show the depth of cultural difference around such things. - 643 words

Story 6: 2019 - Cycling from Siem Reap in Cambodia to Saigon in Vietnam



What a trip! Together with Greg, my regular riding partner, and Maxine, my non-cycling and long-suffering wife, we all agreed to do a cycling tour from *Angkor Wat* down the *Tongle Sap* river to Phnom Penh, then by the *Mekong* river to eventually divert from



the coastal delta up to Saigon. It was run by a bike-touring company and was called a *bike and boat tour*.

The tour had eight riders and two non-riders, and we spent each night on a boat with only 10 cabins that went down the river while we rode on rice paddy walls, village and forest tracks, and just occasionally, some actual streets and roads when we got to towns rather than hamlets and villages. In the hamlets and villages we dodged children, chickens, dogs, cattle and buffalo, all the while greeting people not accustomed to tourists in their rural settings.

The two non-riders, including Maxine, had a separate itinerary using cars and smaller *tuk-tuk* vehicles based on motorcycles with a small carriage. Sometimes when roads permitted, we met up for lunch or a break, but often cars could not traverse the routes we took, so Maxine saw different things to our experiences.

Cambodia

We really enjoyed the trip through Cambodia, and marvelled that a people so recently decimated by their conflicts and still beset by economic woes and with a fractious relationship with Vietnam and in danger of being overrun by Chinese development, could maintain their dignity and humour.

They were lovely people, with many still living in stilted (for flood protection) thatched housing. Living costs were about \$7 per day. A family income was around \$90 per month if rural and poor, \$150 per month if reasonably comfortable. Subsistence farming was a necessity for many.

We learned the basic greetings in Kmer, and found it was similar to Thai language, and not tonal like Vietnamese at all. There was a long history of conflict with Vietnam and its precursor central kingdom of Champa. We also learned about how the French were invited in as allies by the Cambodian king when Cambodia was in danger of being overrun by Thai and Vietnamese armies. Thus through defence of Cambodia and repulsing of Thailand and Vietnam, as well as taking over Laos, the French developed Indo-China as their South-East Asian colony. The evidence of French buildings, cuisine and industry, including the massive irrigated rice bowl of the Mekong delta, was still very evident.

The many insights into what was for me during the 1960s -80s a confusing area to understand the politics and conflicts at the time, were finally clarified and appreciated with wonderfully insightful explanations gleaned from the people themselves. The many experiences and learnings gained are too numerous for this tale alone.

Vietnam

Crossing into Vietnam we entered during the February new-year period of *Tet* in that country. A combination of many businesses being closed while families reunited and celebrated had an immediate impact. The border crossing via the river took some time.

As was our habit, we asked how to politely say 'hello' in Vietnamese. We thought we had copied not just the sounds but also the tones as we heard them, so continued riding through somewhat more affluent (few thatched roofs and walls, more iron



roofs and local brick walls) with the red star Vietnamese flag pennants flying every 50 metres or even closer (a government requirement, we were told) as part of the *Tet* celebrations. Anyway, as we rode and responded to greetings with 'Xin Chao', we had lots of humorous looks. It was only a few days of this before I asked for clarification and was told that, while we had the sounds close to right, we had the modulating inflection with them that made reference to something like 'potato soup', and not the inflection needed for a polite 'Hello!'

Across the two countries we enjoyed a lot of different local foods, mostly involving fish of some sort, Learned that 'basa' which we sometimes get in Australia, is actually Mekong catfish, 'Durian' fruit, straight from the tree, is really expensive, smells like sewerage, tastes like smooth custard apple, and has a cloying after-taste like garlic does, and many meals are accompanied by variations on sliced green mango salad. I had so much of this salad I have no desire to ever eat it again.

I suspect it was the culprit responsible for a magnificent effect on keeping me very fluid and regular for the entire trip, but, in fairness, it may have been the malaria etc medications. Interesting while riding a bike in a country where the rural

landscape often had low or squatting toilets, a cistern of water beside it, and two jugs, one for flushing and the other for personal hygiene. Amazing what one can get used to and how one quickly learns to perform ablutions with the left hand and eat with the right hand when there is no paper. Washing hands took on a very specific significance.



At the end of our trip, Maxine and I spent several days in the central coastal town of HoiAn, just south of DaNang. That was interesting as we visited *MySon*, the Champa equivalent of Kmer Angkor. Thus we saw the

old history of the temple complex of the people who warred frequently with the Angkor Kmer. Also the more modern history of the archeological restoration by the French of over 40 of the 73 or so temples, and the subsequent even more recent USA destruction by aerial bombing of all but a few remaining temples when they suspected the site may have harboured Viet Cong guerrillas close to their major airbase. We were told it had not been so used.

Vietnam has had conflict with China for more than a millennium. They know how to fight. What we refer to as the *Vietnam conflict*, they call the *American War*, to differentiate from the French one, and the



many conflicts with China. We noted there were billboards promoting the military as defending Vietnam. Fighter aircraft flew over regularly on patrol, and the nearby traditional fishing village we traversed on foot was concerned that boats that crossed a line in the water near the Paracel Islands met with grief.

The whole experience left us with a sobering appreciation of the impact of politics, plastics pollution (with very extensive dumping of single-use water bottles as the visible evidence of poor water quality) and climate change (droughts and river salination into irrigated rice fields) on those countries. I was glad I never had to fight there.

1063 words - Kim Tvede (2020)

Story 7: 2019 - Japan

Being somewhat 'over' the poverty and pollution of South Eastern Asia, and having a long fascination with Japanese history and culture through years of martial arts studies, bonsai, and enjoying the



sensation of different seasons, especially cool ones, and thus the coloured maples of an autumn that we seldom experience, we decided to spend a few weeks being tourists and touring southern Honshu in Japan. It was a great trip. This little story took place in Osaka just before we departed Japan.

Sub-story 7.1 - Shopping for a gift for grandkids



We were in a large department store looking for portable quality toys for the grandkids. After a few *'Sumimasen'*, *'Excuse me'* and a few odd words quickly looked up so as to ask for directions, we wandered through a floor given over to furniture, Xmas decorations that were a mix of Japanese, German and

Scandinavian, as in fact the furniture also seemed to be, and headed towards the corner with the children's toys. As we walked along, I noticed the background music from the ceiling speakers seemed familiar and asked Maxine if she knew the song. She said she didn't so I listened more closely and realised it was in Danish, and it was a soft pop contemporary Danish Xmas song. It appeared the store embraced more than just the decorations. I listened to the song as we walked along.

Looking around, I found a package containing a functioning wooden loom for children. Looking at the boxing, I tried to find an English description of the contents. I didn't find one before I came upon a German translation, so I started working my way through that.

A sales assistant came up to me and, in German, asked if she could assist. In German, I noted I was interested in this item, but would she find it easier to speak in English. She explained she had been an exchange student in Germany, but her English was not so comfortable for her. It turned out her German was not even as good as my basic conversational vocabulary, so I started mixing in my even more basic Japanese phrases in order to get

through the description, price, availability and how we went about purchasing the item.

Concurrently, I was still aware of the Danish song playing overhead, and translating what was discussed into English for Maxine. After about ten minutes we had completed the whole transaction, and with lots of '*Arigato Gosaimas*', '*Thank you*', we went on our way.

As we did so, I realised that I had no idea which of the four languages was going to come out of my mouth as we tried to converse. For about twenty minutes after that, all those languages collided in my brain and juxtaposed themselves around between my memory and my speech articulation abilities. Maxine had some peace and I slept very well that night.

Sub-story 7.2 - Buying some antiseptic for a burn

All this followed an experience at the beginning of our trip when I went into a 7-11 store near our hotel looking to buy some disinfectant for a burn I had sustained after a lithium bicycle torch switched on in my pocket, and the resultant heat gave me a severe burn around the size of a 50-cent coin all the way to the muscle.

The burn was becoming inflamed, and I wanted to try a Japanese traditional hot springs *Onsen* communal bath when we got into the mountains near Takayama. An inflamed burn could jeopardise that.

The 7-11 attendant could only sell me hand sanitiser, and through a mix of gestures and various Japanese terms indicated I needed to go to a pharmacy to get what I wanted, and that there was one about three blocks from our hotel in the other direction.



Early next morning I looked up the Japanese word for *antiseptic*, 'Shodoku', set off and found a large pharmacy. I only realised what it was because it had a sign outside that said, in English, 'Prescriptions'. It

turned out that was the only thing I could read. All the shelves, product and labels were in Japanese script, and I don't read *Hiragana*, *Katakana*, or the other of the three written forms of Japanese.

I found a young man in a white coat and simply said, 'Sumimasen, Shodokuka?' He lead me to the hand sanitizer. 'Ie'- 'No'. Then I racked my brain for a more refined description and recalled that, in sword practice (see photo of how one collects a few scars) with a samurai *katana*, to 'cut' was 'kiri'. 'Sumimasen, kiri Shodoku wakarimaska', 'Excuse me, wound antiseptic, do you understand?'... 'Ahh, so, hai!', 'Yes'... and he lead me to a rack and passed me a sealed white plastic bottle with Japanese script all over it. I paid about \$7.50 for it and returned to the hotel.



'Did you get something?' Maxine asked. 'I think so, we will know when I try it and see what it does.' I subsequently tried it and it seemed a bit like clear *Dettol* antiseptic liquid. Anyway, It worked, and a few days later, using a waterproof dressing, I was able to experience bathing naked with total strangers in a hot-

spring communal bath exposed to the night-time elements in the mountains, in November and around 4 degrees, with my washer sitting on my head, as culturally one was supposed to do after first thoroughly cleaning one's body while sitting on a little stool and showering.

It was a great experience. I'm not sure the Japanese quite got over this foreigner who had invaded their ritual bath. In the whole hotel, our party of nine people were the only non-Japanese folk in residence. I'm not sure what we ate either. The menu was only in Japanese as well. Tasted great, though, and we managed the whole trip only ever having to use chopsticks, and no knife and fork. Picking up a cube of tofu without breaking it was the greatest challenge.

- *998 words - Kim Tvede (2020)*

Story 8: 2019 - Taiwan

We had decided that we wanted to experience Taiwan. We found that the local Austronesian indigenous tribal groups were reportedly related to many Indo-Pacific and south-east Asian ethnic groups from Madagascar around in an arc to New Zealand. On Taiwan, this ancient people had several language groups. They had reportedly also been colonised by Spanish, Dutch, Chinese and Japanese settlement over several centuries.





This story took place in the Taroko national park in the amazingly steep mountains towards the central north of the island. The indigenous people of the island were hunting, fishing and farming people and in their various

tribal language groups lived on the ridges of the mountains if their lands were in the mountains. A section of the range has been preserved against farming and mining for limestone (cement) and marble. A hotel in the middle of the park, in a valley, but still quite elevated, is staffed largely by the local indigenous people.

When we booked in to the hotel, we learned that the rooftop would have a local indigenous entertainer performing that night beside the 50 metre-long roof-top swimming pool.

Maxine was feeling poorly so I went up alone to see what this was all about. What I saw was a really big metal fire pit set up and lit, and the entertainer was best



described as a folk singer in traditional dress singing indigenous folk songs while playing an acoustic guitar.

A young hotel worker was giving out free warm ginger tea to anyone who asked for it. I approached him and, after getting a tea, and seeing he had few clients wanting more tea, asked about the performer. The young man quickly let me know that if

we were going to speak English, he had a significant problem doing that. My Mandarin was not as good as his English.

I took out my phone and internet-searched for *Google-Translate* and selected *English to Mandarin*. He also took out his phone and selected *Mandarin to English*. In this way we had an hour-and-a-half conversation via keyboard and gestures.

I learned the singer was singing in his own local language which came from the western side of the mountains. I learned what the songs were about, like one about a mother singing to her baby son that she hopes he grows up to get his hunter's tattoo on his face to show he is successful and can care for his family and make a good matrimonial match. Other songs had other rhythms and topics.

Fascinating, and a great insight into the indigenous culture of Taiwan. They now form less than four percent of the population.

We *'talked'* also about all sorts of topics like comparing Australian indigenous issues to Taiwanese indigenous issues, and the effects of colonisation, his schooling, his family and my family, why we travel, what young people aspire to, and so on.

At the end of our 'chat' he thanked me as he said he was usually very nervous interacting with foreigners, but had enjoyed our time together. I went back to Maxine feeling very uplifted by the whole experience.

When we left the mountains, after stops for the ever-present landslides falling onto the narrow mountain road, we descended into the settlements around Sun-Moon Lake. There we found a district almost entirely populated by indigenous Taiwanese people.

They were selling wooden penis sculptures, for virility we presumed, but what the foreigners might use them for we could only conjecture.



Anyway, being timber we reckoned we could not get one through customs in Australia without difficulty, so settled for buying and trying a traditional local milky-white millet 'wine'.

Well, we found out, as well as a very distinctive taste, it had some powerful other effects as well. We woke up a little seedy the next day. Fortunately we did a lot of walking and recovered somewhat.

One place we walked around was a Buddhist temple dedicated to a young monk, who, with companions, went off on a long and eventful journey to get sacred relics and achieve enlightenment in various ways as they travelled.

We had enjoyed the TV series of this story with our kids when they were young, called, '*Monkey!*' but in Asia they seem to know it as '*Journey to the West*'.

We knew it as a Japanese story, and this temple told the Chinese version of the original monk on which the story was based.



It's funny how these random links bring us to a strange degree of both understanding and fascination with differences between cultures, and then find common ground in the humanity of it all.

- 788 words