

Thoughts on Hohot (or in Mongolian translation, Heuhoute) Trip

Well, the trip started out well, but went downhill. Ray Zazzetti is one of the 17 people who have over a million miles on Alaska Airlines and got us upgraded to first class on the way down to San Francisco. Because things are so busy, we had to go to SFO and take a non-stop to Beijing from there. We hung around at SFO for an hour and an half and finally boarded. When it came time for pushback, the pilot got on the horn and told us that a lady had gotten claustrophobic and needed to get off (she was sitting in the back). One of my guys had a cockpit pass and went up later and found out that she had started to take off her clothes. If you get claustrophobic on a 747-400 then you probably shouldn't be flying. Well, They started to hustle her off of the plane and get her bag off (about an hour). At the door, she decided that she was probably okay, but they kicked her off anyway. Then, some guy in business class told them that his seat back wouldn't lock in the upright position....dumb move. They moved him back to coach and had to lock down his seat...another delay. We finally got out, but we were two hours late. We finally got off and I did get a little sleep. At the airport, the taxis were maxed out and we hired a bus. We finally got to the hotel and got a little dinner at hour standard restaurant (J. Beans). We were all tired and went back to the hotel and I went to bed at 9pm. Woke up at midnight and 2am and am writing this note at 2pm. I'll have more tomorrow. It is 85 degrees here and somewhat hazy.

Well, we made to Heuhoute. It is in the "Mongolian Autonomous Region". It is a somewhat small city but is said to have 1.2 Million people if you count "those in the grasslands". We had a 1 hour packed 737 flight and were met at the airport by the Chinese Civil Aviation Association guys. The airport was very modern, had 6 gates and only handled about 10 flights per day. We then bused to the hotel. The traffic was unbelievable. There are lots of policemen around, but it looks like their primary function is to investigate accidents. There is a lot more bicycle traffic than we see now in Beijing. The main mode of communication is constant horn utilization. The crossing traffic occurs as a suicidal flood of bicycles challenging the trucks, buses and cars. It is amazing. We went for a walk after getting into the hotel and found a lunch counter where we could eat. Of course, no one spoke English and the only Chinese we know is Pichu (for beer). They brought out a tray of cold food, we wanted cooked food. We were not communicating well. They brought out all of the cooks and dishwashers but we were not very effective. I borrowed a lighter, lit it, and held it under a plate; AHHHHHH. We had a great meal. We were never successful in getting the room temperature below 82 degrees and opening the window doesn't help. The Moon Festival is going on which seems to be the general excuse for wild times and fire crackers. It quiets down around 2am. The wake-up calls are unique, you put one in for 6am and you will get a call anywhere from 5:30 to 6:30...the person will get on the phone and yell, "It is time to get up!". They even forgot a couple of times. Mei wan ti (Not a problem), there was a clock across the street which started chiming at 6am. I would say the quality of the hotel was pretty bad...and it was the best one in town. I have to say that the town itself had the slight ambience of Jakarta.

The hotel had another lovely quality. It started on the first day. We got in in the afternoon and decided we would all take a little rest. Right after I lay down, I started getting calls. The calls were all from women. I couldn't understand them at first and told them they had the wrong room. After the fourth call I finally figured out what they were saying, "Massage, yes?"...they were hookers. This went on all of the time and we could expect at least 2 or three calls a night...some of them as late as 3am. One night they even came down the hall ringing our doorbells. We complained, but nothing seemed to work. So, every morning we'd ask each other how we slept and everyone would answer, "Great, up to the obligatory hooker call at 2am". Oh well. I guess they were working on the Marketing theory that out of 200 calls you get one bite...they just needed to refine the concept to realize that ALL 200 CALLS SHOULDN'T BE TO THE SAME PERSON!!!!

We started the CNS/ATM Seminar on the next day. There were about 100 students. It was being held at a hotel near the airport so that meant another "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride" in order to get there. Throughout my travel career, I've been able to avoid the "Oriental Toilet". Unfortunately, I was struck by the need during the seminar and that's all there was. It is a "squatter" which is

basically a porcelain oval in the floor. I did my best but it was a technical challenge to control 4 degrees of motion, keep my suspenders and trousers out of it, and get the business done w/out making an unacceptable mess. I hope not to repeat the performance again. During the process, I dropped my reading glasses and business cards in an unacceptable place. I retrieved and sterilized the glasses, but those cards are GONE!

They held an honorary dinner at that hotel. As the Honored Guest, I got to participate in the Mongolian Autumn Festival (aka Moon Festival). First of all, I was given a bowl of "Mongolian Water", this is really Mao Tai (a high test distilled liquor) which tastes like JP4 jet fuel. Then they brought out the "Piece de resistance", Toasted Goat. It was a whole goat (I mean head, feet, everything), that had been roasted in a sitting position with a bunch of lettuce in his mouth. They rolled him out, I got another bowl of Mongolian Water, and then I was asked to slash an "X" in the goat's forehead. I declined their knife, whipped out my Benchmade Stryker (folding combat knife), and whacked an X in the goat. It was a big hit with the crowd. Dinner was pretty good (no bugs, no noticeable disgusting stuff) the goat was actually very good. We had a early night and were back at the hotel by 8pm. We are hoping we get away w/out another dinner tonight.

Well, it's Wednesday, and we have completed but we are sticking around for the others. We have found out that one free day has been cancelled and so we are desperately trying to find a flight to get out early. It doesn't look good. For the other free day, I guess we are going out to the Grasslands to see how the Mongols live. My guess is that we will see some yurts, some horsemanship displays, and eat another goat.

The People's Liberation Army runs a shooting range near the seminar. After lunch, we tried to go out and pay 38 cents a bullet to shoot AK47s and the like; but it looked like they were closed up. We had another low profile evening, eating Szechwan in the hotel, but took a walk through a small night market in the square. Getting the Szechwan food was another facinating exercise. The menu was in Chinese and no one spoke English. We took the menu to our hotel, found a marginal English speaker, and got our order written in Chinese. It was okay for the most part. I guess we should have been more specific. We wanted Pork with Vegetables, and we got it...pork tongues with vegetables (we are telling ourselves it was pork).

Small digression: Rule # 1, never ask what the food is, never. Even if it has bones you've never seen before. It's just not worth it.

The "Fun Day" had blissfully cut from two days (a great deal as I will explain later). They picked us up at the hotel and we had a Chinese breakfast with our students at the airport hotel where they stayed. We then held our first "Chinese Fire Drill". There were two buses, one big and one small. It took forever for the buses to get loaded. People got on one, then moved to the other, guides moved people from one to the other. We finally got on the small bus (because we knew that's where they wanted us...being higher status and all). They moved people back and forth and counted for at least 45 minutes. Finally, we were on our way. The drive took us from one end of the city through the other. The city is actually quite large. Finally, we exited the city towards the hills and that's where things got interesting. Imagine taking buses down a four wheel drive road. At one point, the road ran along a dry riverbed. Obviously, the place we were going was cut off during the rainy season. They were building a road up the side of the canyon, but it was obviously a long ways from being completed. After that we moved into the mountainous area. Exciting. As I said earlier, the driving is "interesting". We concluded that these folks were "first-generation" drivers. Our driver passed on curves, hills, whatever. There were little tractors pulling produce, semi's, other buses. It was exciting. The area we were driving through produces most of the potatoes for China. You could see the mounds all over the hills as we were driving through. They also had a lot of Chinese characters spelled out on the hills with white rocks. We asked what they said and they were basically advertisements. The few billboards along the road really contained "slogans" (like, HAVE ONLY ONE CHILD, DRIVE SAFE).

After we got up to the plateau, the road became almost reasonable, however, there was a lot of construction going on...building underflows for runoff. We had to go around those and some of them were technically challenging for our drivers. In some cases, the big bus had to unload to make sure it didn't tip over.

We finally reached our destination, which was a small city. It was basically a tourist trap for Chinese to show them the Mongol way of life. They took us to a place which must have been the Campgrounds of America for Inner Mongolia. We were met by singing Mongolians bearing...you guessed it...Mao Tai (or Mongolian Water). As the guest of honor, I had to suffer through a bowl of that stuff. There were about 60 six person yurts which people could rent (that was the threatened 2 day event for us). They brought us into bigger, banquet yurt where they gave us some tea mixed with horse milk and several examples of Mongolian food. I know why the Mongolians tried to conquer the world...they were looking for something decent to eat. They had three bowls of some unidentified dried stuff that was guaranteed to break your teeth. They have small flat slabs of yellowish stuff. I tried it...guess what...it was butter. We got out of there as soon as we could. There was a horsemanship display by the Mongols, short but sweet. All of the riders rode up to the dressing tent on motorcycles. The horses were small (about 11 hands high). You could rent one for an hour for 50 Yuan (about \$6). The Chinese folks went wild...most of them were city folks and had never seen a horse. They also had people bugging you to put on a Mongol Costume and get on a camel. I broke down because it was easier to give them the \$1.25 than it was to listen to them. Many pictures were taken and I suspect the web will be flooded with them soon.

We then had a dinner with...you guessed it, more Mao Tai. The students and gotten used to us by now and were standing in line to toast us. Luckily, there was only one bottle per table or we would have been toast ourselves. They served the basic stuff along with roast lamb on the bone.

Interesting Note: Chinese usually don't eat meat on the bone. A couple of them really took to it, and it was fun to watch.

After that fine meal, we took off to see some current Mongol homes. They had single homes out in the middle of nowhere...but they had electricity, TV, and cell phone service. After that, a visit to a "lucky place" which was really a pile of rocks on the only hill for 100s of miles. Then we took that harrowing ride home. Just before we got to the bottom of the mountains, we saw where a semi (loaded with potatoes) had gone off of the side of the road. Then we saw a new barrier that had been blown through (not that way in the morning). We were grateful that we were only a couple of clicks away from the bottom. They finally had us to our hotel in good order and we packed to get OUT OF THERE!!!

The next morning got us to the airport and through the distinctively lovely experience of getting through the airport bureaucracy. (I should note that we advanced our tickets by a day only because an Air China guy was on the "Fun Day" outing with us and did it over a cell phone. We flew to Beijing on a Bae 146. That is an airplane only the British could design. They sold them to China as part of the Hong Kong turnover deal. The airplane is like a tin can, with a high wing, and four little tiny engines. It was designed for about 20 rows (two by two), but of course the Chinese added 6 rows and went three by three. Luckily, the flight was only 50 minutes long. They plane was at max gross weight and really struggled to get off of the ground....luckily it was not real hot and they had a long runway.

We were extremely glad to get to Beijing, where the water didn't smell funny, the airconditioning worked, and we could get Western food. I took our comrade from Anaheim to the street market and left him at the mercy of one of the sellers of polo shirts (he wanted one, he didn't check the weather and assumed it would be cold in Beijing...it was 95 that day). This particular seller is a young woman about 4 foot 10. She has remembered me from several trips and considers me a great challenge as she has never sold me any thing. I left poor Denny in her clutches and went to get another pair of Raybans. Well, she had him going. He was going to buy one shirt for 120

Yuan but finally bought two for 250...what a dealer. Ray Z gets them for 80 Yuan. Anyway, we had an early dinner at the Hard Rock Café (it is smart to put some stable food in before embarking on a 12 hour flight). The next day we went to catch our United Flight. The airplane was there, the crew was there, but we went through the typical Chinese organizational confusion and got off an hour late. But, I made my connection in San Francisco and got home at last. There is only one problem.

I HAVE TO GO BACK NEXT WEEK! Monday after this, I have to go to Beijing for a day and then off to Amsterdam for a while. After that, I'm calling a moratorium on travel for at least 4 months.