

## KOREA, SEOUL & THE ROTARY CONVENTION

We wait in the hotel foyer for our friends to join us for dinner somewhere. A masked man walks in, he has a hat pulled down over his eyes and a mask up over his nose, wears part camouflage clothing and looks dangerous. I think he has things, guns maybe, hanging from his belt. I cannot decide if he is a terrorist or someone doing an armed holdup on the hotel.

Then he just as quickly turns about and walks out again. We are safe. I suspect now, that he was a motor cycle courier rider who came to the wrong address for a pickup. We are in Seoul, Korea, where our primary objective is to attend the Rotary International Convention – along with over 40,000 other Rotary people. We are also going to see as much of South Korea as we can fit in.

We have reached Seoul a day ahead of our NZ Rotary colleagues. It was evening by the time we reached our hotel after the flight from Chongqing, China. Having eaten Asia food continuously for over two weeks, we sneak next door to “Macca’s” and have a burger and fries! It is almost like cheating! Then to bed to await the arrival of our friends the next day.

Breakfast at the hotel and we seek to go out of the hotel “alone” for the first time when the rest of our team turn up;

They have flown all night from NZ via Hong Kong, cannot get their rooms yet so we go for a look around. Later they are keen to check out the convention venue - believed to be an hour away by subway. The hotel receptionist describes how to reach the nearest train station - about ten minutes walk. We reach it about 45 minutes later and after seeking several directions. I begin to suspect that some things are being lost in translation!

Anyway we find our way through the massive station, determine our route and work out how to buy a ticket. We get help from local people – who speak about as much English as we do Korean. We board the train, crowded at first and we have to stand. It’s mid-morning Thursday. Eventually seats come available and in strict order of age and inability, we take advantage of them. We count the stations off carefully, there are more than 20 of them, but it makes little difference for we are going to the last one anyway!

We then exit the station, pausing to get a small refund on our tickets (I can’t explain this) and walk for about 15 minutes and make the Kintex Centre, the venue for our international convention. It is enormous. Two main buildings – one for the business session and the other for the associated attractions and “breakout sessions.” I later measure out the main hall and find it roughly the size of four rugby fields in two pairs placed end on (if that makes sense). The stage occupies about 50 metres, centred on the junction of the dead-ball lines. Eight TV monitors hang from the ceiling and a further four variously appear at the back of the stage.

While most seating is on the flat, there is a raised section at the rear and that takes a few thousand people. The whole place must easily seat 20,000 so since twice that number are present, half of them must spend time in the second building of similar size and set out (the “House of Friendship”) with hundreds of shops selling Rotary “bling”, promoting Rotary projects and special interest groups.

This year as well though, there is a large section of the hall devoted to other “General stores” selling all sorts of equipment (clothing, appliances, perfumes, gadgets, the lot!) In between the two buildings there are a couple of hundred metres of further shops, mainly food related. It is the biggest “shopping area” we have ever seen at a convention.

When the convention proper finally gets under way we are treated to the usual range of addresses, the most impressive of which was probably that of the RI President “Ravi” Ravindran. His closing address four days later, was similarly impressive and eluded to the fact that his mother had contracted polio some forty or so years ago and how she recovered from that – pertinent now as Rotary has worked for around

30 years to eliminate polio in the world. That is quite independent of Ravi though, for he was only 11 years old when his mother took ill.

In between these two addresses, we were treated to other similar presentations. A couple of Prime Ministers (Sri Lanka & Korea) speak, as does the Secretary General of the United Nations (he being Korean of course). In the afternoon we were able to attend any one of a number of "breakout group" discussions on various Rotary related projects and activities – or just go shopping. Some "general entertainment" was also provided – not the least of which was a Korean called "Si" who sang, danced & made some extremely loud noise. Young people cheered!

In the spare time we had in Seoul we took in some sightseeing. Our first such adventure was to take up the "Hop On – Hop Off" bus tour that is part of our package. Glancing at our touring group I suspect that some of them will move even slower than me, so I offer to check where the nearest appropriate bus stop is and estimate the "walk time." The hotel receptionist gives directions to a bus stop, just 10 minutes walk away, she said!

It takes me about 40 minutes to find it, only to discover that it is a completely different bus company to the one we have tickets for. I retrace my steps and remonstrate with the receptionist. She rings various people and eventually finds a bus stop for us to head for. And – you're dead right; we get sent in the wrong direction again. After several enquiries, we find the appropriate bus stop and our vehicle eventually arrives and picks us up (2½ hours from when I first began enquiring into this trip!) Anyway, we have an enjoyable sightseeing trip around the city and by coincidence, find a Rotary friend of some years from Kansas US, riding the same bus as us. (In a similar vein, when standing in the convention registration queue, I come across a Tanzanian involved in the dairy project our district runs in their area – and who had actually visited our house in Napier three years ago).

No visit to Korea could be complete without a trip to the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) and a group of us set out to do just that. A tour bus picked us up at the hotel and we headed out north. Within a short time we see evidence of the military with sentry boxes along the river that runs near the city. Eventually though, we reach the actual zone and have to present our passports to military officials before we enter the area. It is not entirely clear to me whether we are actually inside "the zone" or not but I suspect at times we must be.

It is quite awe inspiring. At one point we visit a train station that the South Koreans hope will one day be used to travel to the north. All around it are dozens of empty factories that I understand were at one stage staffed by North Koreans who are now no longer able to cross to the border. We visit the "Third Tunnel," discovered in 1978 and I think, one of four dug from the north preparing for invasion of the south. This one was some 1.6km long, 2m x 2m inside and said to be sufficient to allow 30,000 fully armed soldiers to pass through within an hour! We go down it!

We visit the "Freedom Bridge" and the "Unification Bridge" and at another point we are allowed to peer over a wall at North Korea – but not take pictures any closer than the "yellow line" some five metres back from the wall. In one of these area we hear the sound of gunfire or explosions. I hastily ask the guide what is happening and he says "just training!" That night CNN news carried the story that the "Great Esteemed Leader" of the north, had fired a missile that day, though said to be a failure. Were we that close!

We find this whole city (or some 10 million people) quite fascinating. While "western dress" is common, as in China, there are a large number of people walking the streets in "national costume" - this with both men and women. They are very picturesque.

We note the smog that was ever present in China is in Seoul as well. In fact some of the locals claim it has drifted over from China. I am not sure about this, for the smog seems greater in Seoul than anywhere we witnessed in China. I wonder what it will be like elsewhere in South Korea.

Soon we will find out – for we are going there.....



*Human Street Art*



*Fountain*



*Royal Palace*



*Old IYE Student*



*Opening Ceremony*



*Floral Art*



*Ever Watching*



*Speaks for Itself*



*War Memorial*