

## **SOUTH KOREA (& HONG KONG) THE FINAL LAP**

It is time to move on and into the final week of our tour. We are going to explore some of South Korea and also stop-over in Hong Kong on the way home. Our tour group reduces in size as some of our number move in other directions. The remaining board a bus in Seoul and meet our Korean guide. It is great to get out of the city of 10 million and into the country. I am inclined to believe that there is less smog!

Heading south east we reach Yongin city and see a Korean Folk Village – a recreation of a village of some hundreds of years ago. It is quite a massive operation, covering several hectares and during our wanderings we see a Korean drum and dance show, an amazing horse riding show and a mock-up Korean wedding. Then we get to a Korean restaurant for a great lunch.

We follow that with another bus ride for a couple of hours, noting rice paddies and, for the first time, some grapes growing! I later find they are for eating – not for making wine. More disappointment. At Jeonju we visit another Korean village, book into our hotel and go down the street for another Korean dinner. (There is no show of starving on this tour.) In the streets lots of local folk are wearing traditional costume. They obviously enjoy dressing up and apparently you can rent costumes to do this. (I guess it is no different than us renting Art Deco dress in Napier!)

Our journey then takes us through the countryside again and our next tourist spot is the Hanji Paper Museum where they have preserved the traditional methods of making paper. We even try our hand at this. The bus moves on though and keeping in the “paper vein” we visit the Haeinsa Temple where they have preserved, among other things, a vault of wooden printing plates that the Buddhists created for their first printing of books some thousands of years ago. Having written their work on paper, it is imprinted on to specially “preserved” wooden plates – and then each image is carved into the wood! No room for error here. Then they printed their own books – all identical of course!

Our next city is Gyeongju, where the Kings from various dynasties are buried. Throughout a number of parks there are dozens of dirt mounds, several metres high covering these tombs. One such hill has been excavated so that tourists can enter and see an image of what was buried inside. Apparently invasions of Korea over the centuries have taken their toll on some of these burial places and the surrounds. What is still there, or re-created though, present a very good image of Korean culture and life from the past.

Continuing in this area we visit the Seokguram Grotto and then Bulguksa Temple to see (another) majestic Buddha, this one surrounded by his disciples, divas, lions and dragons. Some parts of this area were said to have been lost in the Korean War bombing. This day finishes with us reaching the city of Busan - our final destination in this country.

Up a tower to get amazing views of the harbour and city. We follow that with a visit to the fish market – where hundreds of stalls vie for trade with tanks of live fish! I believe that the Hyundai motor vehicle factory is around here somewhere and so to this week, a big motor show. I try unsuccessfully, to convince the guide that we should find these attractions - rather than fish or more Buddha's!

We have our last supper together and seek to get to bed early for we have to rise at 4am for our trip to the airport! One, an 87 year old Rotarian adventurer, is heading to Japan! (Korea was his 73<sup>rd</sup> country visited – but he has been to Japan before!) We all make it to the bus and thus the Busan Airport where most, eventually, board a flight on to Hong Kong – some three hours away.

At Hong Kong our group breaks up again with half transiting to Auckland and the final five of us exiting to take this last part of our Asian tour. Our Travel Agent and tour leader puts me in charge – I think. No one takes much notice of me though. Left are Eleanor and I, plus three widows – all Rotarians. I convince them that they all need me to survive in this giant metropolis. Another tour guide meets us

and we get to the waiting bus for our journey into the city. There is thunder and very heavy rain as we do this. It does not look good.

Our hotel is the BP International and I am surprised at the “scouting” memorabilia found in the main lobby. I assume there must be some scout jamboree on in the hotel. We have rooms on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> floors and I note that there are several floors in the middle that do not have rooms. Then the name of the hotel become obvious to me. “BP” stands for Baden Powell – the founder of scouting, and as well as the multi-story hotel, the gap in the middle is the local scout headquarters and shops!

We had an interesting experience finding a meal that first night and my operational and leadership skills were really tested. After checking out some three venues (all associated with the hotel) we settle on the third, struggle to find the check in, and seem to have arrived in the middle of a managerial and staff domestic dispute. Someone from “mid management” seems to make the apparent manager go away and an English speaking guest at a nearby table helps us by finding a waiter. He gives us a suggested list of half a dozen dishes and we go for that – with associated glasses of beer. (For some reason I still seem unable to find any real wine list – or one that does not require selling my suitcase and contents to buy a bottle).

The next morning we note we still have inclement weather and are supposed to be heading to the high point for viewing the city. The guide alters the order of things and we go first to a market that was mostly under cover, buy very little, and head to the sea for a Sampan ride from a fishing village which was quite exciting. Of course our tour takes in a jewellery manufacturing plant where I buy and new ring that I never knew I wanted! Lucky I can give it to Eleanor.

We finally make it up the peak and while the rain has abated, we are in the clouds and cannot see much. A cable car ride down to the city follows and we catch our bus back to the hotel. After an early meal we make our way to Pier 3 for a night cruise of the Hong Kong Harbour – an added tour that we had all decided on during the day.

As well as free drinks (at last some glasses of chardonnay) we witness a lighting display that has been awarded some record by the *Guinness Book of Records*. It was spectacular and on a par perhaps with one we had witnessed in Sydney a couple of years back. From the boat I noted (for the first time) two stars in the sky and one of our group claimed they had earlier been a third one!

Bed and an early breakfast saw us on another tour the next day, this time to Macau. What a day this was. A bus took us to the ferry terminal, we found our pier and with hundreds of others boarded the hydrofoil to Macau. The last time Eleanor and I had been there was around 20 years ago and we recall getting a rickshaw to “cycle” us around the city and past a casino. Well now there are 36 casinos. This one time Portuguese settlement vies with Vegas for gambling.

The buildings are massive and some with the strangest of names and themes. One for instance, was the Venetian Casino and this came complete with the canals of Venice inside it and gondolas transporting guests around the various shops. Another had a “Royal” theme with gold carriages and Grenadier Guards on the door. We take the compulsory trip up another tower – this one with an “A. J. Hackett” bungee jump of some 233 metres! We see some jumpers.

Development in Macau is staggering – not just the casinos but everywhere. An example of this growth is the building of a 60km bridge to link Hong Kong and Macau! Our guide also points out a nearly completed building of some 50 - 60 floors that has been built in the last six months! Like Hong Kong, Macau is a “special” territory having been handed back to China by the Portuguese in the late 1990’s. And that finale really caps off our journey.

The “Final Five” - we have eaten so much our “last supper” was a few cans of beer and crisps in our room. We have had an amazing journey. Well two in our case, one to China & the other Korea – each of about 15 persons. We all leave at various times the next day and most head home to NZ – where we can see the stars every night, blue sky every day & we can drink tap water! Life is good...



*Dressing Up in Korea*



*Pagoda – South Korea*



*Busan Fish Market*



*A many legged horse?*



*Fancy filials*



*Main Course yet to come*



*Multi storeyed Pagoda*



*Smart little archway*



*Guarding the Casino*



*Scouts at the hotel*



*Floating Chinese Restaurant*



*Gondola @ Macau?*



*Hong Kong @ night*



*Another Macau Casino*