

10 Last mango in São Paulo

Conference at Piracicaba

In an earlier chapter, I wrote about what seemed like a once in a life-time dream round-the-world trip, and how this “extended” my life span by a whole day. The reason for this trip was to attend a conference on ectomycorrhizal fungi for plantations in Piracicaba, São Paulo State, Brazil. There were not many ways to get to South America from Perth and so I planned my travel eastward and included 2-day holiday stopovers at two places we all dream of visiting: Rio de Janeiro and Paris. France was celebrating the bicentenary of the French revolution and so it was going to be a good time to visit (oh, the pain of being a research scientist – such a chore, ho hum).

In the September of 1989, I took off from Perth International airport bound for Sydney with a stop-over at Adelaide. Between Adelaide and Sydney, I got chatting with the lady who sat next to me. She turned out to be a travel agent.

“Who will you be travelling with?” she asked.

“Be careful,” she said when she discovered that I was bound for São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro on my own. She referred to petty theft and crime on the streets there. That does not sound good, I thought to myself.

I rested overnight in Sydney before joining a long trans-oceanic flight (on an Aerolineas Argentinas B747) to Buenos Aires via Auckland. When I got into Buenos Aires I was booked into a hotel room which was directly over (it seemed) a ballroom where a party was held into the wee hours. I remember thinking here I was halfway around the world from Perth, Australia and I am being kept awake by a DJ playing loud music by Aussie songbird Kylie Minogue. Early the next morning, I got onboard a taxi arranged by the hotel to get me to the airport a long way away. The morning was dark and foggy; It had a sinister air about it (my imagination was at work). I wanted to be sure that the driver knew where he needed to take me as those were the days not long after the military junta which had made many Argentinians disappear. But, the driver spoke no English and I no Spanish. So relieved was I upon arrival at the airport that I gave the driver a generous tip. And then I could not find my check-in counter. The nearest thing I could see was check-in for San Pablo. I wanted São Paulo. I asked around only to be told that San Pablo (in Spanish) was São Paulo (in Portuguese). When onboard and waiting for the plane to leave, I saw ground crew loading dozens of heavy 45-gallon barrels (what on earth were in them?) into the hold below me (the plane was a Boeing 727). It was a turbulent flight to São Paulo and I was praying that the crew had properly secured those dozens of barrels in the hold so that they wouldn't come loose and cause a problem.

I was picked up at São Paulo by a Brazilian conference organiser (a Taiwanese who had made Brazil his home as also had many Japanese and Koreans).

“Bom dia! Dr Lin, I greeted, “Tudo bem?” (“Good day, how are you?” in Portuguese)

While I was gathering my luggage for our road trip to Piracicaba, one of the first things he cautioned me about was to be careful. He told me the story of when he was on a beach at Rio de Janeiro and a man walked up to him and asked for his watch. Seeing that the mugger had a knife to make his point persuasive, Dr Lin obliged. “Caution”, I thought, “Be careful”, I remembered. I resolved to have my briefcase close to me at all times. This I did all the while I was at the conference at Piracicaba. It even went to the toilet with me. But I also had two Brazillian scientists who helped to look after during my stay at Piracicaba viz. Jeanne and Suilli (she had been a postgraduate whilst I was a Research Fellow in the same department at the University of Western Australia).



Piracicaba, Sao Paulo State, Brazil; 10 Sept 89

By the falls with Jeanne (bottom left) and Suilli (bottom right), Brazillian mycorrhizal scientists from Brasilia. We had dinner after the picture was taken, at the restaurant (second floor) seen on picture left.

Despite all the caution and warning, the Brazillians seemed like a most friendly people. Two Brazillian strangers would chat with another like long-lost friends a few minutes after having met each other for the first time. Brazillians would call out to their friends and who would answer “oi!”. How Malaysian, I thought (I still held a Malaysian passport then even though having resided in Australia for about fifteen years by that time). More than that, this was a land where the average white Brazillian can be seen to have a standard of living very similar to Malaysia. They have terrace houses which look just like the ones in Malaysia. I discovered that their language Portuguese has words used in Malay. “Jendela”, “bola”, “gereja”, and “mentega” all have the same meaning in both languages. But of course that should not come as any surprise as the Portuguese controlled Malacca from 1511 to 1641. Malay is a magpie language but more about that next time. I have retained a smattering of Portuguese from those days. It was my first use of a Romance language and it has grammatical gender. For example the ordering of a drink can be different depending on what is being ordered: One says, “Uma Coca Cola, por favor” (“One coca cola, please”) but “Um guarana, por favor”.

This is because Coca Cola is considered feminine while guarana (a drink made from a fruit from the Amazon of the same name) is masculine (no one in Brazil could tell me why this is so but they guess it is because coca cola comes in a feminine-shaped bottle there).

And so, I was pleased to be in the land of bossa nova, samba and the lambada (that eponymous song was popular at the time of my visit and at the conference dinner I saw people dancing the lambada - I had never before seen or thought possible, couples dance while literally stuck together). It was also the homeland of Ayrton Senna, my Formula 1 Grand Prix hero (who sadly, was killed while racing at Imola, Italy in 1994. I stopped watching F1 on TV after that).

São Paulo



São Paulo

When it came time for me to leave Piracicaba and go to São Paulo to visit colleagues at the Universidade de São Paulo, I was put in a limosine to be driven the couple of hours to the city, one of the largest in the world (population 12.4 million today). As we approached the city outskirts, the driver, who spoke no English sign-languaged me to wind my side window up, to keep it up, and to lock the car door. “Caution”, I thought, “Be careful”, I remembered.

Soon, I checked into my hotel and waited for the arrival of my Brazillian colleagues. When the pair of them arrived, I asked to stop by the hotel’s cashier’s counter. I set down my briefcase beside me on the floor and proceeded to try and engage with the cashier (who was not attentive – deliberately so in after thought so as to distract from what was about to happen next). I wanted to check if the hotel would take my Australian credit card which I had in my hand to show him. Less than a couple of minutes later I looked down and my briefcase was gone. I could not believe it. The two companions with me had not seen anything untoward either. I thought maybe I didn’t bring it downstairs with me. Then the acceptance set in that I have been robbed. In my briefcase was my cash, passport, airline tickets and onward hotel reservations. All I had left to support myself was the credit card which I was holding I my hand. I quickly checked out of the hotel and my colleagues took me to a police station to make a report. One of them then took me to her home where I was to stay for the following days of some two weeks while I sorted out what needed to be done to get back to

Perth. The home I was gladly taken to was that of my unintended hosts, the de Oliveras, who lived in a gated community with guards and high boundary walls. I had never seen such living before but of course these are common place all over now, including Malaysia.



Where a Brazilian colleague and her family hosted my enforced stay in São Paulo

The first thing which I needed to do was to get some sort of replacement identification fit for international travel. Of all the countries in South America, it turned out fortunately enough for me, that the Malaysian government had embassies in Argentina and Brazil. So I had to travel to the Brasilia, the capital somewhere in the middle of the country (some 400 kilometres from São Paulo and 1 hour 35 minutes by plane.) Brasilia is an interesting place, purposefully built as the nation’s capital much like Canberra, Islamabad and Putrajaya. This city has very distinctive architecture and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Many of the civic buildings there were designed by Oscar Niemeyer, a protégé of Le Corbusier.

I made telephone contact with the Malaysian Embassy in Brasilia and the Third Secretary there said that he would pick me up from the airport.

Brasilia

After pickup at the airport, the Third Secretary took me to his home where his mother had prepared a nice Malaysian lunch for us. After that he took me to have a photo taken for the identity card made out of on card paper with typewritten details and the exhortation, “Please assist this traveller return to his home country”. It had my photo and some official-looking endorsement stamps



National Congress building by Oscar Neimeyer

from the Malaysian embassy. This was going to be the identification with which I was going to travel halfway around the world to get back. I was dubious. Indeed, I am sure that such simple cards would not be acceptable for travel these days.

While waiting for things to be processed (they must have contacted the authorities back home to establish who I was), I walked over to the Australian embassy which was close by the Malaysian one and informed them of what had happened and how I was going to travel back to Perth. Later that same day, the Third Secretary took me to his golf club where I caddied for him for a stint



Ministry of Foreign Affairs Building by Oscar Niemeyer

of nine holes. The next day, he took me to the Brazilian Foreign Affairs Ministry where he was to receive the latter's official dressing down because the Malaysian Ambassador had imported a two-door sports car (Mercedes) without proper special clearance.

All in all, it was most touching what that Third Secretary did for a stranger albeit Malaysian citizen in trouble. He was certainly pleased to have been able to assist me because as he himself related, he hardly saw any other Malaysian in that remote city (why does Malaysia have an embassy there?). In fact all the embassy staff (there were not many) were craning their necks to see who it was that the Third Secretary was bringing to the embassy that day. I learnt that the Third Secretary was promoted and was posted to Africa a few years after our encounter.

After I was armed with the identity paper, it was soon, after two weeks, time to leave the home of the de Oliveras. From São Paulo, I flew to Rio de Janeiro for a transit stop instead of the planned holiday stopover which I had bought (my enthusiasm for a holiday in Brazil had worn off days before that) and was soon in the air again bound for Madrid. After a short stopover there it was onwards to Paris where again, instead of my planned two-day holiday, it was a twenty minute stop onboard the plane. But, I did get to see the Eiffel Tower – through the window of my plane as we took off for Amsterdam. There, I had my first stop where I was due to be processed by immigration control. I thought I would have all sorts of interrogations by the Dutch authorities before they would let me in for an overnight stay at a hotel next to Schipol airport. But they just waved me through. The next morning I boarded my flight bound for Kuching with a transit stop in Kuala Lumpur. Upon arrival at Kuching, immigration took away the identity paper which had served me so well from São Paulo onwards. My sister-in-law who worked as the Personal Assistant of the Director of Immigration, Sarawak arranged for me to get a replacement Malaysian passport right away the next day. Thus, I received a replacement within two days, no doubt because the Director had personally overseen the case. Within a few days I was back in Perth and had my

Permanent Resident stamp re-established in my new passport. But, that new passport would not be used for long because as a result of this Last Mango in São Paulo (I just named this chapter to sound like the film “Last Tango in Paris”, which starred Marlon Brando and Maria Schnieder), I decided to take up Australian citizenship after having lived in the country for such a long time. Thus, I became an Australian in 1990 (no, I did not have to have a lobotomy in order to qualify – this was a joke about Australians which was often told when the topic was immigration. When I asked my brother if he had a lobotomy before he took on Australian citizenship after many years being a Kiwi, he retorted, “No, I obtained a criminal record”).

As a result of this experience, whenever possible I try not to make solo trips. It is just too taxing to cope with all the travails of procedures and protocols, plus on top of all that, needing to watch out for one’s belongings and personal security. If it’s a holiday journey, it can often become less than just wind down time. Having another fellow traveller to watch over each other makes all the difference. *Tchau* and *adeus*.