

A TAXI FROM HANGZHOU

Ben Julien

Whenever I'm overseas in another country, another culture, another life, I feel very Australian. I feel more patriotic, I miss home, I want to gasbag with other Aussies. Yes, I know, so does everyone else. This is nothing new, it isn't an amazing revelation or something to recommend a dose and a half to daily to anyone else. It's normal!

But, I don't really like it. I don't want to be just Australian. I love Australia and I enjoy being me but what I particularly want to do when I live overseas is to blend in. I strive to emulate the natives, I love picking up the local colloquialisms and I like the feeling of warmth and acceptance when natives understand how much you respect them and appreciate being with them.

Trying to fit in and learn about another country is a long and trying process. Travel is all about the mishaps, misadventures and mysteries we all come across and is not something you can do as a tourist, flitting in to see the sights and try the food. What I really enjoy is the anecdotes associated with being an Aussie long-term in another place. They highlight and bring out just how big a divide there is between where we come from and where we find ourselves at that point in time, but how we can learn and enjoy (even if only in retrospect!) what we did. Take for example a night about a year ago when I found myself in the front passenger seat of a dilapidated Chinese taxi. I was on my way back home from one little town to the nearby city of Hangzhou where my university was. I had been there for some months but due to circumstances I still couldn't speak Chinese so my directions consisted of the slowly and clearly enunciated word "Hangzhou" and a business card with the university's address on it. My gracious driver looked at me with the usual mixture of bewilderment at finding a strange white person in his taxi and barely concealed urgency at wanting to get on with the job.

I wasn't alone. Behind me in the back seats were my girlfriend and a colleague working at the same university. There were no seatbelts in the back seats, but there was one in the front. Two in fact, but the driver obviously thought his superfluous. My natural reaction from years of good upbringing in Australia was to fasten mine. I proceeded to do so chatting to my friends in the back about something when I noticed we weren't moving. I figured the destination had been sorted out already, so I looked at the driver to see what the matter was... and found him staring at me with an international look of reproach on his face. He then muttered something

to me pointing at the belt. I don't know, I can speak some German, some Spanish and a bit of French but not more than 20 words of Chinese - his meaning was pretty clear however.

“You don't like my driving? You think we will crash? We are going to smash into four other cars, somersault and finally end up in a muddy ditch on the side of the highway, are we?”

Feigning ignorance I did the standard response to all such situations where you don't want to offend but equally don't want to sacrifice safety. I nodded, smiled, shrugged my shoulders and said what a lovely night it was. The car started moving.

Driving cars, buses and taxis is a bewildering experience in many countries. In that area, it was a fine art and excellent lesson in the practical application of controlled chaos... without the control. I call it an art, because I defy anyone to have the requisite mixture of audacity, nonchalance and sometimes total disregard for others seemingly necessary to drive on the roads. Picture to yourself driving at home towards some pigeons. You know they will wait till the last second to move off the road, but they will move. We slow down anyway. I never noticed anyone slowing down. However I also saw only one accident in my time there. I haven't seen a pigeon killed on the roads either but I don't know if there's a correlation.

So anyway, we were happily on our way into the hour taxi ride in between these cities. It was simply too late at night for anything but a taxi, and the price compared to Australia was negligible. The orange street lamps spaced every 100 metres just seemed to highlight the shadows and there was nary another vehicle to be seen. Quite peaceful after the evening we had had to that point, raucously devouring any number of delicacies in a local restaurant (where I'd also ordered 'white wine' not keen for beer and received a large glass filled with fire water, a big smile and the expectant stares as my hosts waited for me to down it all).

Quite peaceful indeed, to the point where we were all dozing off a bit or lost in our thoughts. That is, until we started to notice the driver slowing down and looking off into the dark trees on the side of the highway. Glancing over there ourselves we couldn't see anything but the accentuated shadows from the streetlights and the dirty white metal of the barrier cordoning off the highway. I look back at the driver who is muttering to himself as he slows down more. Alarm bells start to ring – we are in the middle of nowhere and no one is around - I can almost feel the tumbleweeds blowing across the road. I can hear the restless movement of my girlfriend and my colleague behind me.

Suddenly the driver sees what he is looking for, slows the car to a crawl and turns it off the highway into a gap in the barrier. There is a muddy path leading from the highway, in between some dense foliage, off into the darkness.

We all shit ourselves.

Flashes of robbings, murders and rapes from a thousand movies and stories enter our heads and we all start reaching for the taxi doors and contemplate bashing the driver and taking his car back to the highway. Being good little Westerners however we wait a little bit to see what is going to happen and eventually realise he is just trying to avoid the upcoming toll gate on the highway - not take us to a prearranged warehouse to meet up with his mates.

Once my heart has stopped thumping, I finally manage to squeak out a belated “why?” in Chinese and get a response from a quizzical driver I guess was something like this:

“You haven’t been in China very long, have you?”

Guess we hadn’t.

Being overseas in fact is something akin to being up on stage 24 hours a day. Obviously the experiences of a young white Aussie male would be significantly different in Europe than in Asia, however wherever I’ve been I’ve felt this quite natural sense of being a guest, a tourist, an actor. Being other than the average Joe in downtown Brisbane is the big drawcard for me. Life out of the rut and all those clichés. Cue anecdote.

Never have I experienced the sheer celebrity value of being from another country than in good old China. Walking down the street in such a country, you are pretty much guaranteed a big audience at any time of the day and the audience loves a free show. And nowhere is it easier to perform. Simply get dressed and walk out the door and voila! You’re on! Although the reaction would probably be the same if you weren’t dressed... Picture a normal city street filled with storekeepers, businessmen, school children, passers-by and the ever-present locals just hanging out. Picture all of them suddenly stopping what they are doing and turn Mexican-wave style to look at the foreigner. If you had a decent view from above somewhere you’d be able to see the movement of the foreigner simply by where the crowds stop and start gawking to when they begin moving again. Even after walking the same streets, buying goods from various shopkeepers and teaching some of the school children, the audience never tired. They were simply insatiable. I hope my performance was up-to-scratch.

Getting off a rickety bus in a town 4 hours away, having used up my excess gluteals as my own shock absorbers, I was somewhat in need of a toilet. The bus station wasn’t particular big, but packed with people, of course, as we’d decided on this occasion to travel in the May Day week when pretty much the whole country packs up and goes somewhere.

Mentally crossing my legs, I located the water closet and tried hard not to run inside. I was too preoccupied to take much note of the three cubicles surrounding

those holes in the ground used for number twos. All attention was on the five stand-up troughs. The first two and last two were taken. One heavenly trough in the middle was free. Sighing in relief and anticipation of relief I dash over. I unbutton my jeans and pull the zip down, reaching to free myself. At the same time, two pairs of male Chinese eyes on my left and two pairs of male Chinese eyes on my right swivel to my face and then scan down to what my hand is now holding, ready to relieve my abused bladder. I had forgotten I was still on stage.

Stage fright kicks in.

Nothing is happening downstairs. The blood rises up my neck, verging dangerously on a blush. I jiggle a little, muttering ‘come on, come on!’ under my breath. The men’s eyes are still on me...well not on me but you get the picture. I hope they were impressed with what was probably their first experience of Caucasian genitalia, but I suspect they weren’t.

Luckily my plumbing finally took over, probably getting exasperated at the mental hindrances imposed by my brain and the trough was filled. My hands never zipped so quickly as I escaped back to my friends in the bus station. They asked me if I was OK – perhaps I was still blushing a little? – but I just mumbled something noncommittal as I ushered us off into the town.

Toilet stories. Everyone has one, usually four. For me they are almost as common as everyone’s favourite – food.

Trying to eat like the locals is something we probably all like to do, but potatoes day-in-day-out in Germany or rice for morning, lunch and dinner in China can be a bit overwhelming. Normally I would steer clear of McDonald’s back home but having a Macca’s meal became something of a cathartic ritual upon occasion. Out with the native cuisine, in with those familiar fast-food tastes. I recall driving for 2 hours just to get to one particular fat-food chain and actually feeling that the time spent was worthwhile. I guess a little taste of home is necessary sometimes – otherwise the joys of watching a boiled turtle being devoured in front of me by hungry students can be quite overcoming (and I do mean all the turtle – even the shell was eaten).

My time living, working and studying in Europe and China I would like to think was unforgettable but when returning home to the normal life, normal job and normal rat race, it can be hard to hold on to that feeling or ambience we feel elsewhere. It seems to just drain away with everyday life back home, leaving me feeling like I have missed something. Photos help, as do emails, but the heightened sense of excitement and tension is something I only seem to get when living overseas. However along with this, I also feel a sense of holding my breath – waiting and waiting for the chance to come home back to Australia again – be it in 3 months or 2

years. It all boils down to the fact that as much as I strive to be other than I am, I will always be very happy to come home, and relax.... until the next opportunity to work overseas comes along.



Ben Julien was born in Brisbane in 1976 and had an uneventful childhood before heading off to Europe as an exchange student at high school. Since then he has studied languages and has lived and worked as an English teacher in Germany, Argentina and China. He is planning to head for Japan next.

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