

VIP in Montevideo

Montevideo was a place which I, as a French guy, knew very little about, but I was curious about it knowing that a maverick French writer and poet Lautréamont (whose full name is Isidore Ducasse Comte de Lautréamont) was born there in the 19th century. He has had a meteoric career and died young and so did not have time to write many novels or poems. However his work reached celebrity when the Surrealists (an artistic movement mainly based in France which has been mostly active between the two world wars) discovered him and lauded his major work “Les chants de Maldoror” (“The Lay of Maldoror”). I had read that book and the surrealist atmosphere emanating from it was impregnating my imagination when I was thinking about that city. However Montevideo remained a faraway place for me until I worked on the Postal Administrations project at SITA.

Postal Administrations have an international organization, the UPU (based in Bern, Switzerland) and regional organizations named “restricted unions” , among which PUASP (Postal Union for Americas, Spain and Portugal) was very active at the time I was working with them. I was in contact with the Director General of the UPU, Mr Thomas Leavy from USPS (US Postal Services). Mr Leavy strongly believed that Postal Administrations should strengthen their international services to better fight the growing competition from express couriers , and he also seemed convinced that SITA was the right provider to develop these EDI services for them. However despite the size of USPS (40% of world mail at that time) its influence within the UPU (which is a very democratic organization: one country one vote) was facing many hurdles, similar to the situation in many international organizations. Moreover the USPS could not take the lead on a project with SITA because as per US Law they had to select US suppliers and could work with non-US ones only if they had to join a project developed by other Postal Administrations. Therefore Tom Leavy facilitated our contact with the PUASP, which had a small technical team working on IT applications for Postal Administrations. The PUASP is based in Montevideo and its Secretary General at that time was Ingeniero Cabero, as he had chosen to be called as he was proud of his technical background. Therefore I travelled several times to Montevideo to meet him and his team and work on the EDI project for Postal Administrations. The meetings were friendly and progressing well, however sometimes not easy to follow for me as Ing. Cabero was often forgetting that I was not speaking Spanish and was he was spontaneously switching to that language when talking to me or to his team! But despite that language barrier we had developed an excellent and friendly relationship and he also appreciated that I was an engineer, rather than having an administrative background as most people in his field, and so he was very happy to exchange with me .Of course when coming to Montevideo I also visited the SITA center and met Mr Buero who was the country representative. I remember that the first time I met Ing. Cabero both he and Buero were at the airport to welcome me. Mr Buero had made reservations in a nice restaurant in the City Golf club, but Ing. Cabero, despite his diplomatic status had very simple manners and insisted to take us to the meat market in the center of Montevideo to eat “parilladas” there. It was delicious but certainly not very select and I remember how Mr Buero looked horrified of eating in that place. Ing. Cabero was explaining to me the origin of the building housing this meat market: it was a metallic frame building designed and built in England and sent to Montevideo to house a railway station. But somehow this railway station was not built as initially planned and this

building was used therefore to house the meat market. Ing. Cabero was very fond of cooking and I still remember that he invited me once at his place and cooked himself delicious meals!

When I had made some progress with the Postal Administrations project, and I was promoting a workstation combining Skyway (a database of flight schedules developed with ATL DP, see the [Skyway](#) story) and Sitatex, I proposed to demonstrate to Ing. Cabero and his team in Montevideo the functionalities of this solution. I was convinced that they would be capable of, and interested in, developing an application based on Sitatex and Skyway for the operational management of international mail and cargo.

The meeting in Montevideo had been decided and it would comprise a demonstration of both Sitatex and Skyway. I had good support from the SITA MVD team and a circuit between the SITA center and the PUASP building was ordered and established for this demo. However I was faced with a difficulty at the last minute: in order to have access to both Sitatex and ATL DP (remember that we are in the early 90's and the SITA network was not using IP at that time), the modem needed to have a special feature (I confess I have forgotten since which feature exactly enabled to route the traffic to the selected application) and checking with MVDXC, I received a last minute advice from them that they did not have such modems, although initially they had told me that they had them. That was very bad news for me! PARXC could lend me such modems (I needed of course two of them, one for each end of the leased line) that I could take with me but there was still an important difficulty. The world before Internet was indeed a different world: it was generally not allowed at that time to import telecommunication equipment (such as modems) in another country without the prior formal authorization to be obtained from the country's consulate, here in Paris. As this formal authorization (the name of which I have also forgotten) was of course paper based and more than one week was necessary to obtain it. Unfortunately when I was informed of this problem, it was too late to get this authorization. I discussed with Ing. Cabero the possibility to postpone the meeting, but obviously this delay was not to his liking and finding a new date looked difficult given his very busy agenda. He seemed very enthusiastic about the project and thought it should not suffer any delay. I was explaining too him the difficulty I was facing but he did not seem to understand and he was dismissing my explanations about the reasons for such a delay. After some pondering, I finally decided that I would take the modems from Paris in my hand luggage, hoping that I could get through the customs and checks when arriving in MVD. Again please remember that this story was happening well before 9/11 and in most airports there were virtually no X-ray machines to check hand luggage at the airports. So I embarked in Paris, bound for MVD with my two non-declared modems in my hand luggage!

The trip to Montevideo is a long trip, with a stop in Rio. Now as I had already been there, I knew a little bit more this city which is the southernmost capital city of the Americas, I had found it nice to visit and I liked its relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. I was hoping that the demonstration would run well and that the PUASP and its Secretary General would be convinced of the solution proposed by SITA and therefore take the lead to launch an airmail management application based on Sitatex. I thought then that I might have to learn Spanish to properly follow-up on this project and these thoughts sounded nice. Then I thought about the modems which I was carrying in my hand luggage. What should I do when arriving in MVD: declare them right away to the authorities at the airport and excuse myself for the lack of appropriate documentation and hope that they would let me go with them, or try to smuggle them, hoping that my hand luggage would not be controlled? But what if I

was controlled and the modems were confiscated? Besides the risk of a fine and possibly some complications, I was realizing that in this case anyway there would be no possibility for a demonstration. That would not look very professional indeed. I started to be seriously worried, realizing that the situation really looked risky. I tried to reassure myself: maybe the authorities were not that strict about a temporary import of modems. I remembered that during a previous visit the chief of center, a young guy had explained to me that he was a trained pilot and had his own small airplane and whenever needed he was flying it to Buenos Aires which was rather close and bring back equipment from there if it was urgently needed in MVD. He was rather proud of telling me these stories which were a sign of their dedication to the operation of the center. So I thought it must be easy to settle with the authorities a temporary import of two modems. Or maybe I was too optimistic? My worries were coming back again, all the more as I was getting tired now. When my plane landed in MVD, I was not feeling good at all! But determined to cope with the situation, I disembarked, walking on the tarmac towards the airport building together with the other passengers and carrying these modems in my bag. Then I saw a man, who I did not know come into my direction and after checking that I was indeed "Senior Kaliszewski", he politely but firmly asked to follow him which I did, leaving the passenger group. But the worries did not leave me but rather increased. This person was speaking Spanish only so I did not understand the explanation he gave me when asking me to follow him. We entered a large room in the airport and I immediately recognized that it was a room for official events and a group of people was standing there chatting between themselves. And I recognized several of them, including Ing. Cabero and Buero. I was still puzzled. When Ing. Cabero saw me he strode along in my direction and welcomed me warmly and loudly.

I then realized that all these people were here waiting for my arrival. Ing. Cabero told me to give my luggage and passport to his staff that would take care of all the formalities for entering the country. I was still reluctant to give away my bag with the modems when Ing. Cabero explained to me that owing to his diplomatic status he could organize this official VIP welcome bypassing all normal formalities and checks for entering Uruguay. I was entering safeguarded under diplomatic immunity! Ing. Cabero looked happy of having organized this unexpected VIP welcome! But I was even happier and feeling so relieved, realizing now that there would be no problem with the modems which were "smuggled" under diplomatic immunity. And indeed a few minutes later my passport and luggage was brought back to me and we were heading to the city in a large car, pleasantly exchanging about this nice surprise of Ing. Cabero coming to the airport and organizing with the authorities a VIP welcome for me. Of course I was very grateful to him for that initiative which saved my day and I was pleased with this unexpected VIP welcome which came indeed at the right time for me.

The demonstration was scheduled for the day after so I quickly handed-over the modems to the local SITA staff and I was eager to make sure that everything worked fine. And it did. The demonstration and discussion went well all the more as the presence of local SITA staff was very helpful for clarifications in Spanish whenever the audience got lost with my explanations in English. For the PUASP IT development team, I felt it was also positive to have direct contact with the local SITA staff.

So I was rather pleased with the progress made with this demonstration of Sitatex and Skyway to the PUASP team and from the discussions I had with Ing. Cabero I could see that he was also satisfied. I was also curious about knowing more about the reasons that had motivated him to organize this VIP welcome which indeed proved very helpful to import the modems for the demonstration, but when I

hinted to him about it, he ignored my remark so I did not insist. Obviously he did not want to tell me anything about it.

When the demonstration and meeting were over, it was time for me to pack-up my luggage, including the modems I had brought with me. And so I was worried again about customs check at the airport for my departure as I still did not have any official document for their temporary import in Uruguay. Ing. Cabero proved he was acting consistently and told me that after my VIP arrival, I would of course also have a VIP departure! I was delighted to hear that as it meant I did not have to worry about bringing back the modems with me. So again we all went to the airport and the customs clearance was taken care of by the PUASP staff without any problem.

During the flight back, I was thinking about all this experience, which turned out to be very nice and easy to get through thanks to the VIP welcome and departure organized for me by Ing. Cabero. This has been indeed a providential solution to my problem of getting the modems in and out of Uruguay without the proper authorization to do so officially. Ing. Cabero had certainly decided it on purpose without telling me about it. It has remained in my memory as a nice souvenir in my professional life!