

## Travel adventures while working for SITA (2)

The following occurred during the era of the Boeing 707. I was living at Hongkong and I had to attend a meeting at SITA headquarters in Paris. Air India offered me an N1 ticket which was a nice thing although it entailed a change of aircraft at Delhi while connecting between two AI flights. Since all other options included also a stop somewhere in India, the AI N1 option did not look much constraining and seemed to be the safest way for arriving on time at Paris, I took it and so it did without any problem.

Returning to Hongkong I left on a Monday morning heading for Frankfurt our first scheduled stop but there were heavy fog there, the airport was closed and we landed at Basle. To my surprised I was handed a railway ticket for Paris and we were a small group of people at 03:00am waiting for a train at Basle's railway station.

In Paris on Tuesday we were given a new boarding pass for the Wednesday flight to Delhi. The flight was on time and we disembarked there on Thursday to board the connecting flight for Honkong. We were approaching Thailand when the crew was informed that the fuel providers at Bangkok were on strike and our flight was diverted to Kuala Lumpur where we landed on Friday. The next day we had an excellent flight to Hongkong where we landed on Saturday.

Airlines commercial advertising of the time was : "Western Europe from Far East in less than 24 hours" we had done it in less than a full week only by one day...

Air India all along had been very obliging with the passengers who had nothing to complain about. However I never understood the purpose of sending us during that particular night by train form Basle to Paris.

-----

Still on board a B707 but this time sitting on a jump seat in the cockpit. It is a flight Bangkok – Saigon in the middle of the American Vietnam war. The traffic is known to be very heavy around Tan Son Nhut airport and the captain tells his crew : "Open your eyes and be especially careful of the copters". Confirming these words the controller just tells us to join a holding area further north.

We can see other aircraft circling around at a specific level, given in feet and attributed to them by the controller. We have been waiting for some time when all of a sudden we see two B52 overtaking us. They are heading towards 11:00 o'clock (in air navigation terms) and slightly faster than us so the encounter longs for about 30 seconds. They look so close and so huge just above our heads with their 8 engines. It is quite impressive. I had the experience of group flying in the Air Forces but never so close and under such big aircraft.

The controller finally called us for joining Tan Son Nhut circuit where we land later without problem. After landing the flight engineer sitting near to me said:

- What do you think of the B 52 ?
- Impressive! they looked so close !
- They were indeed! I think the American feet are much shorter than ours !

-----

I am on a China Airlines flight from Hong Kong to Taipei, sitting on an aisle seat at the rear of the aircraft. It is lunch time and the hostesses are carrying by hand the few special meals. An air hostess passes near me in the aisle, one tray on each hand. Suddenly there are some turbulences and the tail of the aircraft oscillates back and forth. The girl follows the oscillations and ends her journey.... sitting on my knees still holding the trays until another hostess came to rescue her by picking up the trays.

- Excuse me Sir, I am so sorry, such thing never happened to me before!
- You are much welcome, Miss, it has been my pleasure!

-----

Not all the flights have the same charm. I am at Hanoi Gialam airport not long after the liberation. Following the Soviet model what we call Civil Aviation Administration is still in the hands of the military. A field officer is going with me to what is now called TP Ho Chi Minh in order to discuss the fate of the former Saigon XS centre. The plane is a Tupolev. On board are a few wooden stools rather similar to the ones we use in Europe for milking the cows, as well as some small benches in order to accommodate surplus passengers.

I am discussing with the officer when suddenly someone come to him in a hurry and both leave together. A few minutes later I see through the window a man taken out of the aircraft, walking down the foot-bridge being held by two guards. Then the officer comes back to his seat and tells me:

- Most likely a hijacking attempt!

He then explains that an air hostess while sitting near a passenger on a small bench felt a hard object against her thigh. Alleging service duty she left and advised the captain. Two guards seized the man by the back, searched him and found that the hard thing was in fact an automatic pistol and that is the reason why the man was disembarked and handed to the local authorities.

The plane takes off 15 minutes later without checking whether there are any other armed people on board and we finally land safely at TP Ho Chi Minh.

Since the media was not covering such events I learnt nothing more about it and I will never know whether the gun was really carried for a hijacking attempt or for any other purpose.

-----

In the late '60s Air India based at Bombay was the exclusive international carrier whereas Indian Airlines was serving purely domestic destinations. Foreign carriers between Far East and Europe were mostly serving two Indian cities, either Bombay, New Delhi or Calcutta. It took me quite some time to convince Indian Airlines to join SITA since they were simply using telephone with the local offices of foreign carriers while the traffic with airlines not operating in India was very small. However I had established good relationship and one day they gave me a free pass BOM-DEL.

The flight was going well when came the time for a meal. Two hostesses came to me looking rather confused as they were asking for my ticket. They looked at it and said :  
- This is a pass for local staff and we don't have a meal for you.

- You had your meal before taking off I suppose?
- No but the whole cabin crew is eating at the back
- OK so I join you
- But it is not very good, you will have to eat while standing up or sitting on the floor

The second hostess suggested:

- We could put the curry in a tea cup and bring it to you
- No, no tea cup, please, I just join you and no problem.

So I did and went to the galley. The cabin crew was there taking food from a large basin. For years I had been using more often chopsticks than forks but that was my first time eating a complete meal with my fingers. My neighbours were doing it with extreme dexterity. As for me I am still ashamed of my awkwardness specially when handling food with sauce or other fluids. One hostess came to my rescue with a roll of toilet paper to clean my hands. But let us be honest: the food was very good and although I was a non revenue passenger I think I have been more pampered than any first class passenger on that particular flight.

-----

I am on a Beijing-Paris flight with a stop at Tehran, probably the last one to stop in Iran for some time. China has started modernizing while implementing the economic reforms whereas in Iran the situation is tense after the revolution as the Americans diplomats are being confined to their embassy and the failed attempt to rescue them by helicopters.

The flight goes well. On board I am the only Caucasian with about eighty Chinese passengers. For the meals every one is given a small tray with various foods but the rice is carried on a trolley and each passenger presents his empty bowl for the hostess or steward to fill it up.

We land at Tehran and are carried by bus to the terminal. Inside, the walls are covered with anti-American slogans. Soon I realised that after being the only Caucasian on board I am now the only one in the terminal. Comes the announcement to all passengers to show their passports and boarding passes before re-embarking. I don't have time to produce mine since one guard grasps my arm as a second one walks in front opening doors as we cross a few rooms and walk along some corridors before getting out to the tarmac. From there we walk towards the plane that is standing quite far away. I have been making a few queries to my guards but never got any answer. I am wondering what they could expect from me. May be they are planning to disembark me here and they are taking me to the aircraft to select my luggage. We reach the plane and climb the stairs. The guards say something in Iranian to the cleaners and one of them shows me where to sit. The guards remain at the door. Fifteen minutes later comes the bus with the first passengers. As people are moving all around I seize that opportunity to return to my original seat. When all passengers are on board the guards leave the plane and the doors are closed.

After a quiet flight I disembark at Paris.

I most likely will never know why I was spared showing my passport to the immigration clerks and why I had to walk on the tarmac under escort instead of taking the bus to reach the aircraft. So far I never found any good reason to justify such an exercise.

-----

Coming back from Paris Headquarters I am heading for Tokyo. It is a Lufthansa flight through Frankfurt and Anchorage. The flight is full and I am upgraded to First class. Good start. At Frankfurt the flight is even more loaded and I am given a jump seat in the cockpit. That is excellent. For a fan of aviation to fly in the cockpit, in the vicinity of the North Pole and in a 747 the most sophisticated aircraft of the day it is just a dream.

The GPS is still unknown and the navigation tools are the classic 3-Gyros auto-pilot and Doppler radar for ground speed accuracy. I can recognise Jan Mayen volcano which I have seen a few times as it is now a natural beacon on the Polar Road. We pass between Greenland on the left and Svalbard on the right, two countries for which I will have to wait many years before visiting them by sea. Finally it is the Arctic. The view is not as good as it was with the Constellations since we fly much higher. A routine flight and we reach Alaska where we land with good weather.

At Anchorage there is a change of crew. I am still sitting on my jump seat on which I expect to stay for near 24 hours, but no problem I like the place and could easily remain there for two days. The new crew tells me that a typhoon is getting close to the Japanese shores but relatively far from Tokyo.

When about half distance between Alaska and Japan we are informed that the typhoon has modified its route and is moving closer to Tokyo. Some hours later by hearing aircraft in contact with Tokyo Control it is clear that the typhoon is now a real problem but the airport is still open.

We are in contact with Tokyo Control. In summary the airport will close soon and we shall be the last one to land. Should we abort the landing then we should divert immediately and should not attempt a go around.

So we do a direct approach and land at Haneda. A bit bumpy but a good landing and we move to our assigned location. The engines are stopped and then progressively we realise that the aircraft, although sitting on the ground, start to be shaken by the wind becoming definitively stronger. One has to be in it to believe that such large aircraft can be so much shaken by the intensity of the wind. The tower informs us that no bus can come to the tarmac for the time being and we have to wait inside the plane. That statement does not surprised me. I have seen two very strong typhoons hitting Hongkong and after one of them there were in line 11 buses and trucks overturned along Aberdeen road.

After about one hour a ground engineer managed to come on board by driving a small tractor and then penetrating in the 747 by a trapdoor under the fuselage. He told us that the wind should now decrease and that within another hour a bus would be able to come and pick up passengers leaving the plane through that trapdoor.

It took a bit more than one hour before the wind decreased sufficiently to allow our escape and some more hours in the airport before getting some transportation to downtown since all traffic had been interrupted but I was able to reach my hotel before the night.

I previously had a few occasions to fly at the proximity of a typhoon and even once I had been flying above the Paracels Islands just above the eye of a typhoon, but that Haneda

airport adventure has been a unique occasion to experience a typhoon on board an aircraft while staying on the ground !!!

-----

The Hongkong Kai Tak runway was built on the sea by “The Dragages”, a French company which at that time had just completed the “coral” runway of Tahiti Faâa airport. One end of the runway was on the shoreline of Kowloon city and the other end in the sea facing an opening between Victoria Island and the Continent. Most often the wind was coming from the sea in which case landings were made facing the sea. The incoming aircraft would fly over some small Hongkong islands, turn above Kowloon Peninsula, making its last turn above Kowloon city. In the “final approach” above streets and avenues the houses were so close that the crews while joking were saying: “we could see through the windows what programmes people were looking at on TV”. For that reasons Kai Tak was considered as a dangerous airport but for the same reason there has never been any major tragedies as the crews were kept very alert when landing there, and furthermore the airport authorities were also very efficient in maintaining a suitable environment.

Either by sunshine, in the rain or at night, landing at Hongkong was always an interesting moment to be enjoyed. Each landing was not an adventure but over 20 years I have landed 364 times at Kai Tak and this will remain in my mind among the best flying memories.

Bernard Leroy

End of part 2 of 2.