

The implementation of SITA in North Korea.

To be granted the official agreement required for operating a SITA centre was in the Far East in the early days a very lengthy process as we were facing the strong opposition of the local PTTs not ready to consider any breach into their absolute monopoly. The local airline not keen to open an external telecoms gate for the benefit of its competitors was at best remaining neutral during the process so we had to search for any potential or expected beneficiary of our project such as the Ministry of Tourism, the hotel associations and/or whoever was willing for some reasons to support us in our request, before starting serious negotiations. There has been however a Far Eastern country in which the story of SITA implementation did follow a very different path.

Once in the early '80s during a meeting with Aeroflot I was told : "Why is SITA not operating a centre in Pyong Yong as frequently we have problems of communications while supporting Air Korea international charter flights". My answer then was : "How can I open a centre there without visiting the place and discuss the case with the local authorities, to do that I first need a visa to enter the country"

I don't know whether that discussion had anything to do with what followed but a couple of months later I received an invitation from the Civil Aviation of North Korea to visit Pyong Yang together with a telecom engineer. I answered affirmatively mentioning for visa purpose that the engineer accompanying me will be Kevin Slattery.

At that time practically nobody could visit North Korea if not invited by the government. Furthermore to enter North Korea we had to cross China, a country of which the entrance was still very restricted and where tourism was still unknown. Anyhow we obtained all necessary documents and one day we took a train from Hong Kong to Canton and from there we boarded a flight for Beijing. After landing there and clearing our luggage we suddenly realized that we were the only ones remaining alone in the small terminal with no means of transportation for the city. It may look surprising but in the Far East after the coming into power of a Soviet style regime, the new government virtual presence was so effective that a physical presence by the representatives of the new authorities was not required, outside of some crucial security points. Kevin and I started to walk around finding only empty rooms, went up and down and finally heard some noise : it was a lady sweeping a corridor. She did not look surprised, she did not smile either, being smiling or friendly was not a good revolutionary attitude, but from her signs we understood that we had to wait while she telephoned somewhere. We had been waiting for near an hour when a taxi came and drove us to the Beijing Hotel, the top one in the Capital.

In those days there were very few hotels operating in China and each one was organised to deal with a certain category of visitors. They were the ones receiving guests from "Brother Countries" meaning others Socialists countries, the ones for "Overseas Chinese" and so on. I don't know whether it was because we were coming from Hong Kong or for any other reasons but we were generally sent to the Overseas Chinese category, which suited me well as their food was the most palatable.

But our problem was of another nature as we did not have any "Accommodation Voucher" and although we were ready to pay cash the Beijing Hotel will not accept any

guest without such document. The best we could obtain was to get a chair and be allowed setting on it for the whole night near the reception desk.

The next morning a car came to fetch us for a photograph session with a very old fashion camera and it took time to have our pictures duly processed. Then we were taken to a Ministry office where we finally obtained our hotel vouchers for both the current day and the return trip. When we reached the Beijing Hotel again it was just the time to leave it since our flight to Pyong Yang was scheduled for mid-day. At the airport, the Air Korea Representative was waiting for us having just been informed of our coming by the mail addressed to him on board the incoming flight of the day.

The flight to Pyong Yang went well and to our surprise we disembarked on a red carpet while two very young girls offered to each of us a nice flower bouquet and lead us by hand to the official lounge where we endured a welcoming interview by a delegate of the Ministry. Soon came what seemed to be a very important question : «What do you think of the Juche?» Kevin and I looked at each other since we did not have the slightest idea of what was the meaning of that word. Actually the Juche was a specific evolution of communism that Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader, was extolling as a means to liberate the peoples of the world.

After the ceremony we were given interpreters who became our guardian angels and never moved more than ten meters away from us during the whole length of our stay. Then we were taken to the hotel in town. It was a hotel with bedrooms without keys, not even for the bathroom, and where privacy was totally unknown. Interpreters or people who look like hotel staff were entering our rooms at any time to discuss schedules or any other matters.

In the middle of the afternoon a movie theatre opened especially for us in order to see on the screen the progress of the nation. As we had our own personal interpreter we were four altogether in the large auditorium. After contemplating the movie we had dinner in the hotel and after dinner we were lead again to look on the TV the progress of the nation and the efficiency of the government. The same after dinner scenario came back in the following days but pretexting fatigue we made it progressively much shorter.

One day would have been more than enough to settle business but the authorities had foreseen five days so visits and entertainment were being organised to fulfil the time. We were invited to the circus, the theatre, the opera house where, like in most communist countries, the plays were excellent but much too political for our taste. In the circus the clowns were playing very anti-American jokes of bad taste. I remember my guardian angel asked me why I did not laugh and my excuse was that I could not well understand the meaning of the joke. We visited many schools. Children were told that they were the luckiest children in the world and definitely they seemed to believe it and were enjoying life with pleasure, and the same was true for all the schools we visited. We also spent a day at a beach where some Russians were enjoying the sea , they were the only foreigners we saw apart from a few Japanese staying in our hotel. As for the locals it was a real contrast with China where the Mao uniform was still the rule, there in North Korea, people were ostensibly wearing jackets, some of them with even a tie.

We also visited some historical places like the house where the Great Leader was born. We were taken to contemplate the tree in which he climbed to look at the moon, the stone he sat on to observe the stars and a few more salient monuments. That place had

certainly been a poor peasant house but, as it became a site for pilgrimage visited by millions of workers, its surrounding garden had been arranged so nicely that it was difficult for a visitor to imagine the tough environment of a poor country farm.

As we were driving in Pyong Yang, I noticed a strange kind of construction and I queried its purpose. We were told that it was a subway entrance. The subway has been built very deep under the ground to be used as a shelter in case of nuclear attack. The entrance had been designed to create an airlock in order to keep it isolated from the outside world. Having shown interest in that construction a visit was organised for us on the following day. Because of the deepness the escalators were very impressive by both their length and their speed. At the bottom end of each pair of escalators an operator was sitting between the two rows of steps ready to stop the system if a passenger was falling. Like in most communist countries the main subway stations were remarkable by their spaciousness and design. The theme of decoration was some salient steps in the life of the Great Leader. While we were contemplating the third station a train stopped on the other side of the quay. I had a quick look inside it to see whether it was as clean and well maintained as the one we had been taken when suddenly the passengers stood up: there were probably some confusion about our group's actual identity.

Pyong Yang had a rather appealing appearance and we would have enjoyed being left alone walking in the streets visiting the place on our own, but our interpreters would not let us pass through the gates and on each occasion they evoked something urgent to be discussed inside the hotel.

Came the day to leave the place after a «debriefing» at the airport. The Delegate of the Ministry wanted to hear from me the usual diplomatic words of appreciation of what I had observed during my stay and my support for the «Juche» variant of communism. During my years of negotiations with various Asian governments I had learnt to avoid any comments supporting or denigrating any political action since what is a good word today may become a bad one tomorrow or the other way around. Not receiving the expected praises from me the Delegate started questioning Kevin who gave him a better envelope but as empty as mine. That may seem a bit rude but on some subjects one has to be firm and such attitude did not prevent us to obtain what we wanted to from the beginning: Air Korea was to become a SITA member and we were finally authorised to open a centre at Pyong Yang.

The technical implementation was completed later on by Jacques Bernard and Jean Desplanques at which time there were much less suspicion on the side of the Korean authorities and more freedom for SITA staff. As for myself I received from Air Korea a bottle of brewed ginseng for Christmas gift for as long as I remained posted at Hong Kong.

As a true communist airline Air Korea did not offer upper class levels on its aircraft but there were two pairs of seats facing each other in front of the cabin with a table in between and these seats were usually reserved for senior passengers. We were seated there each of us with a hostess on our side. Unfortunately the girls did not speak any English so they selected some brochures and pointed out the pictures to us with their fingers like do mothers showing new books to their young children...

We finally reached Beijing where this time we got rooms at the Beijing Hotel. As we had to spend one more day in town before getting a flight for Canton we walked to the

Forbidden City where after paying a dime of a remimbe we joined a group of workers visiting the palace with all explanations given in mandarin. Later on we enjoyed visiting a People Commune where a lady in charge explained to us that if only half of a neighbouring hill has been even off whilst the other half remained up there still unfinished, the purpose was to show to the future generations the hard labour their ancestors had accomplished... The next day we took the flight to Canton and we finally reached Hong Kong on a train in which the loudspeakers were hurling all along the martial songs of the days, «the East is Red», and many more...

Bernard Leroy