

A Slow Meander Going Nowhere

Perhaps the only thing that could have prompted me to leave the sea was the thought of flying. There were times when I felt I spent more time in transit lounges, aeroplanes and the air than I did in ports, on ships and at sea.

Take my time on the Maersk Teluk. I left home on the eleventh of March and arrived back on the 29th of that same month. My memory of that time is a blur of buses, taxis, ferries, transit lounges, hotels, and airplanes.

This rather futile management decision was made in the early stages of the Maersk/Safmarine merger. It had been decided that Safmarine should take over the manning of the Maersk Teluk, a bulk carrier being managed from India. The first stage of the take-over would be flying out a master, chief engineer, chief officer, 2nd engineer and electrician to get acquainted with the ship before flying out the rest of the crew. We were to join the Teluk in Haldia on the Hoogli River in India.

The five of us left Cape Town and Durban on eleventh of March, meeting up at Jan Smuts before heading for Heathrow on BA56. Just another BA flight.

After six-hours of napping and leg stretching at Heathrow, we boarded another BA flight, this time heading for Mumbai. Bit of a culture adjustment on that flight — more saris than Western dresses, the inflight films were in Indian, not English, and the ‘chicken or beef’ was curried.

Mumbai International was just another international airport, and we went through customs and immigration with nothing to declare or complain about.

The first real taste of India was the transport between International and Domestic terminals. A quaint old single decker bus. One of those where the bonneted engine sticks out in front. The passenger compartment was made of wood, with open windows. Or, at least, there was no glass in the window spaces. But it was a pleasant half hour drive with a cool breeze wafting through the bus as we rumbled along in the peaceful dark night undisturbed by any unnecessary lighting.

However, there was nothing quaint about the domestic terminal at midnight. A big and bright space with only a few red plastic four-seater benches to give it some colour. What is more, these benches had armrests for each seat —so no lying down for an airport nap.

The aircon was off, and there were no vendors selling dodgy food or, more importantly, bottled dodgy water. As for the water in the dodgy toilet, well, dying of thirst seemed the better option. Shortly after 4 am the *A.R. Jandas Gagandas Kartari's Traveler's Requisite Store* stall opened. There, if you were desperate, you could buy "Videos and books, cellophane wrapped sandwiches and unwrapped rolls."

The first thing the ground staff did when they came on at six was to turn on the aircon. Now we could be cool and bothered when we boarded our Air India two-hour flight to Calcutta.

We had no great expectations from this leg, and we were not disappointed. However, the landing was quite spectacular. We hit the ground rather harshly. It was the highest I have ever bounced in an airplane. I almost expected the "fasten seatbelts" light to be switched off. Taxiing to the terminal was rather tame after the second more gentle bounce.

We collected all our luggage, which was an unexpected bonus.

Next on the program was a four-hour, three taxi convoy to Haldia. Not sure of the distance, but it was mostly bumper to bumper driving the whole way. I passed the time away by tapping the driver on his cap whenever he nodded off.

We were dropped off at a four story building in a sparsely built up shaded area. There was no lift and, naturally, the agent was on the 4th floor. After finishing off the formalities we walked back down the four flights to the pavement and waited for our transport to the ship.

All this walking up and down had awoken my body and brought on a call of nature.

"Just pee in the gutter", said Geoff Boyer, the chief engineer, pointing to the sluggish flow of water in a fairly wide and deep channel running along the pavement.

"Geoff, I am a captain, not a chief engineer. I don't pee in public places".

When I got back down from four flights up Geoff pointed to a broken pipe coming down the side of the building. "See that pipe? Well, your yellow pee isn't as prudish as you — it was quite happy to drop in on the channel. You could have saved yourself a four-flight climb if you had listened to a wise chief engineer".

We signed on the Maersk Teluk on the 13th of March 2000 in Haldia, which is a coal loading facility on the Hoogli River halfway between Calcutta and the open sea. We sailed for Sebuka in Kalimantan on Borneo the following day.

Frank Pronk, the chief officer, didn't sleep too well that first night on board. When he opened the door to his cabin the deck shimmered with wall to wall cockroaches.

It was a pleasurable seven-day passage down to Sebuku via Malacca Straits.

We anchored on arrival. The first of the barges were waiting for us and it wasn't long before we started discharging the coal into them using the ship's cranes.

After a few days at anchor we were becoming tired of being passengers and wanted to take over, but our South African crew was only due to arrive in four days. Our hosts were friendly, the food and the weather were good, so we weren't complaining any more than what is expected of seamen.

25th March dawned without any hint of change in the tropical air. But change was on the way. Around 'smoko' the Indian captain advised us the rest of our crew would not be joining us. Seems management had decided this idea of theirs was not such a good one, and we would be flying home on the 27th.

The return trip started with speedboats, and not a BA flight. Two and a half hours in speedboats skimming along under the equatorial sun saw five very red-faced men at the agent's office in Kotabura on Laut Island.

Our second leg was a seven-hour drive in a minibus to Banjarmasin. There was, however, some entertainment provided — the Karaoke Bar on the car ferry crossing over to the mainland of Borneo. A car ferry with a Karaoke Bar. In the middle of the day. Never seen one before, and never seen one since.

We arrived at the hotel at seven, just in time for supper. And then to bed. But not to sleep — the disco was next door to my room.

Our early morning taxi ride got us to the Banjarmasin airport in good time for our flight to Jakarta where we landed at midday. We had been booked in at the Huswah Transit Hotel about a half hour drive from the airport.

Spike Milligan told the story of booking into a hotel when the receptionist asked if he had a good memory for faces.

"Yes" replied Mr. Milligan.

“Good” said the receptionist “there are no mirrors in the bathrooms.” I wonder if Spike Milligan had perhaps slept at the Huswah Hotel?

I did enjoy my lazy walk about though. Happy people, dogs and cats strolling about or dozing lightly in the morning sun. All very relaxed, but then in that heat it would be difficult to get worked up. The only bit of pestering was by people wanting their photo taken.

In the evening we flew to Singapore and became reacquainted with cutting edge efficiency and helpfulness during our brief stopover before flying on to Johannesburg.

I had a once in a lifetime experience at Jan Smuts — my luggage came out way ahead of the rest of the pack on the conveyor belt. That meant I would be able to get across to Domestic, pick up my ticket and check in early enough to get a window seat to Cape Town. Wrong — I came up against big company co-ordination at the ticket counter. Our tickets had been booked, but not paid for. And the Cape Town office had yet to open.

We were not a happy bunch of sailors. I decided I would pay for the tickets and claim it back later. Off we went to the ticket office, and I told the lady of my plan. She called up the tickets, and would you believe it, they had just been paid for by the company.

I got to my seat between — the window and aisle seats — minutes before take-off.

We were on the last leg of our aimless meander going nowhere slowly.

I arrived back home at Durbanville on the 29th of March — just 18 days after having left home. The cat opened one eye, said “You’re back early,” and went back to sleep.

Les Hellmann