

Lapsang Souchong

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I was living in America when I decided to move to Kuala Lumpur. KL as it is affectionately known had been my favourite stopover when I flew monthly between Sydney and London. Many of my American friends were perplexed by my excitement about



constantly moving to new countries. I tried to school them in the small tricks that ease the frustrations of global mobility but they preferred to believe that changing countries is difficult. Some even said I had abandoned them. It was difficult to relate to this, because when I first decided to travel the world, my Australian friends simply waved goodbye and said they would see me later.

Upon my arrival at KL airport all past familiarity evaporated. The familiar mix of Muslim, Indian and Chinese peoples

outside customs still greeted me but all familiarity evaporated as I exited the airport. I wasn't prepared for the eight-lane expressways and modern high-rise buildings. Momentarily I felt I was still in the U.S! This new Malaysia didn't just put up a new building, but in a frenzied attempt to prove they were no longer third world, they built entire cities at a time. Construction was everywhere! It took only four weeks for a beautiful hillside of lush greenery just behind my house to become a scarred swathe of terraced red clay in readiness for another monster block of apartments. Driving to the city was virtual gridlock and architectural drawings advertised clusters of modern towers with names like *Communication City*. When Dr M. was leader he had determined that Kuala Lumpur would become Asia's bigger and better answer to Silicon Valley.

In spite of this surge of modernity I quickly learned that the telephone company couldn't offer automated voice answering but everybody carried a cell phone?? The city was a blur of faces that sounded like crickets as locals spoke nonstop into their cell phones. This made Malaysia appear advanced but cell phones (called hand held phones or HHPs over there) existed mainly because land lines were so unreliable. KL was yet to publish a telephone directory so you quickly learned to exchange cards for business and social contacts. It was a common frustration to find an excellent

restaurant and then be unable to return because you had misplaced the business card. At popular restaurants in KL bookings were essential. Even with a reservation, the average wait was still an hour. One usually met friends for dinner at 9.00 p.m. because traffic was so bad during commuting hours. Our home in Bangsar was only seven miles from the city center yet it took two hours some nights to arrive at a city restaurant! We usually would be served our first course around 11.00 by which time we were ready to gnaw on the table legs.

With no telephone directory to assist in locating businesses it was imperative to call for directions before heading out. In most countries I usually found my way around a city by street names, but in KL street names never were used. I would be guided to my destination via building names. "Exit the expressway where you see the IBM *building* on your right, then turn left at the Sabak Medong *building*, turn right at the Rashad *building* and then left at the Sony *building*" was typical of directions.

Malaysians (as they were known when Malaya was a British territory but who are now called *Bumiputras* in keeping with their indigenous language) may not have learned how to provide adequate telephone service but they are extremely competent in pirating software. Riding an elevator with Bill Gates one day (yes) I hesitated to ask him what he intended to



do about the pirated Microsoft software being sold openly for five dollars just a few streets away. I am still using some five-dollar Microsoft software on my laptop several years later, so obviously the *Bumiputras* have honed this skill.

When I moved to KL I was looking forward to the familiar sound of Muslims at prayer in their mosques throughout the city, one of my favorite memories from earlier stays. Amongst Malaysia's 18 million, the Muslim *Bumiputras* account for almost two-thirds, but now even the large mosque down the street sat quiet every time I went by. I never discovered why this had changed but perhaps the prayers were simply lost in the sound of jackhammers and constant construction noise. Some memories are best forgotten, like living in KL during the forest fires that made world headlines. I have kept the front page of a local newspaper that shows the city of KL as a large dark cloud without even a faint outline of any buildings. There were days when the Prime Minister ordered water to be sprayed over the tops of all tall buildings in an attempt to abate the smoke haze. Fortunately, children were removed from schools and sent south to Australia or back to England with wives following as quickly as possible. But husbands had contracts and couldn't leave, so that summer of the forest fires was a lonely time for those of us who elected to stay.

Initially, it was surprising to see the

problem addressed publicly because Dr M. maintained a dictatorial hold over the press. However, when we read the accompanying story we recognized Dr M's signature deviousness. Indonesia is the culprit, he raged. Well, yes, the smoke drifting up was from burning timber there. What Dr M. omitted was that at least three of the largest companies who owned the huge tracts of timber were Malaysians. They were willing to imperil the health of their own people to assure their timber profits. This was when I finally accepted that the once gentle, laid-back Malaysia was gone.

To ease my frequent international relocations, I look for an item I use every day that reminds me of my native Australia. When I lived in Colorado there were many in the supermarkets, including the Australian favourite, Vegemite. My American husband now has Vegemite on his toast in the mornings, to the amusement of visiting Australian friends. Colorado also had the Coors Brewing Company that bottled Fosters Beer, and this helped all Australians in Colorado feel at home. When I moved to Malaysia I found one of my comfort items on the first day. Straight from the plane, browsing the local supermarket shelves, there it sat - Lapsang Souchong tea. I knew the moment I saw the familiar name that I had found my point of reference in



yet another foreign land and would feel at home.

After Malaysia I moved to Qatar where they fortunately had Lapsang Souchong in their supermarkets. The Caribbean followed and the familiar Lapsang Souchong in the cup beside my laptop anchored my Australian sensibilities on an island as far from Australia as it was possible to venture. This year I moved to Korea and have yet to find any Lapsang Souchong. However since the Koreans first harvested tea during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) I am happy with their very fine tea. I still searched though for something to remind me of Australia and for now it is a brew of a different kind- Australian wine- which is readily available in Seoul. Who knows, wine in lieu of tea may improve writing skills.

