

Asia Revisited

This describes the continuation of our China & S.E. Asia trip, taken in March and April 2012. We had previously been to all the countries except Korea, though three ports were new to us: Busan, Nagasaki and Nha Trang. The China portion of the trip was mainly overland and details can be found in *China- Ancient & Modern*.

This part of the journey was by sea aboard the beautiful cruise liner, 'Diamond Princess'. We last sailed in her in 2009, from Bangkok to Sydney, and were delighted to be back on board. This cruise was from Tianjin (Beijing) to Singapore and it included Shanghai and Hong Kong, both of which, as well as Beijing, we cover in *China- Ancient & Modern*, for the sake of geographical consistency.

March 30th – Tianjin, China

After a drive of about two hours from Beijing, during which we saw three super-fast bullet trains, we arrived at the cruise terminal and after very easy check-in procedures, were soon settled in our warm and comfortable cabin.

March 31st – At Sea

We had a lazy day with our feet up to recover from the miles we had walked during the previous 12 days!

April 1st – Busan (a.k.a. Pusan), Korea

A bright, sunny and very cold, crisp day welcomed us to this huge fishing port on our first visit to Korea. We were particularly keen to see something of the country as we had lived and worked with Korean contractors for two years when we lived in Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the '80s. We enjoyed many sociable evenings and weekends with them and in doing so learnt a little about their culture. We went on one of the ship's tours and started at the enormous, multi-storeyed fish market, where we hardly recognized more than half a dozen species. Many were most peculiar and some absolutely beautiful, though others looked more revolting than you can imagine and we wondered whoever had first dared to eat them; it seemed that the more disgusting we Westerners thought a 'delicacy' looked, the more attractive it was to the Koreans.



Modern multi-storey fish market



dried fish & seaweed



Sea squirt – yummy!?!?



Wet fish – all alive

Then we went for an hour's drive through ribbon developments of featureless shops and blocks of flats, and then a stretch of motorway which was planted with attractive trees and shrubs. This brought us to a temple, which was situated a long, uneven climb up a hillside so Sarah decided not to risk it (arthritis joints do not take kindly to twists and falls). Instead, she enjoyed a walk along the babbling, rocky river then sat on a bench with her book, enjoying the aroma of the chestnuts an old lady was roasting over a make-shift brazier on the pavement nearby. An oriental man came and sat next to her and insisted she had the first chestnut from the bag he'd bought – it was delicious! He spoke no English and of course Sarah didn't speak his language but they sat in peaceful harmony, occasionally smiling and nodding to each other and as he came to the end of his bag of chestnuts, he offered her the last one. Having had one and knowing this was his last, she tried to decline but he absolutely insisted. When she took it and he had watched her eat it, he got up, smiled and bowed and went on his way. We wonder if it is some sort of custom that if you are eating in the presence of another person, you must share or if he was just friendly, We know that in China one must never take the last portion on a plate for oneself but always serve it to another person at the table, so perhaps this was a similar situation. Whatever the reason, it was a lovely experience and one she will remember.

When we arrived at Busan in the morning, and again when we left, there were entertainers in national dress singing and dancing, and also a percussion group. It was all very colourful and reminded us of our Korean friends in Saudi Arabia when the ladies would wear their beautiful national dress on formal occasions. We did feel sorry for these dancers, dressed only in flimsy silk with the temperature not far above freezing.



Roasting chestnuts



Traditional dance troupe

Martin and the temple-visitors returned and he said he thought Sarah had made the better choice as the temple was in the realms of 'quite nice'* and not worth an hour in the company of 40 other people, being closely herded by a neurotic guide who was so afraid of losing one of her charges (she was a young student guide so couldn't be blamed). He was frustrated at not being able to wander off on his own and he and another couple wished they had made a break for it, but hadn't the heart to upset the poor girl.

*Perhaps describing this colourful temple as 'quite nice' was a bit unfair, but do bear in mind it was probably our 20th temple in 14 days so we were a bit 'temped out' by then!



Colourful temple at Busan



Shrine in Busan temple

April 2nd – Nagasaki, Japan

This day was spent in Nagasaki, which we liked very much and would certainly return there if the opportunity arose. Unfortunately we were already booked on a ship's tour and by the time we were able to find out how easy public transport is there, it was too late to cancel. Never mind, forget the herding and time wasting, we did get to the museum and memorial gardens for the victims of the A bomb. The museum exhibits made for sobering viewing and both the contemporaneous accounts by survivors and also more recent memories of older people who survived were harrowing but salutary

The gardens were quite stark and a black marble chest, containing the names of the many thousands of victims, surmounted by an obelisk, was placed in the exact spot over which the bomb exploded. It was surrounded by a number of concentric circles of stone, signifying the way the shock waves of radiation spread. There were numerous monuments and statues commemorating various communities which perished and the most moving were those which remembered the thousands of school children whose schools were annihilated, along with the teachers and pupils. We were told that the Japanese have a superstition that the crane (bird) symbolises life and rebirth after death and it has become a tradition that when children visit, they make origami cranes to hang on the memorials. Many schools visit and they bring strings of 1,000 cranes, all fastened together, often out of coloured paper, and these make a lovely sight.



One of the memorials to the children



another, surrounded by cherry trees in bloom

Another wonderful sight was the cherry blossom which was in full bloom. We had so much hoped we would see it but as it wasn't fully out yet in Korea, we thought we might be too early; indeed, the guide said it was two weeks early and as it only lasts a week, we were exceptionally lucky. Looking at cherry blossom in Japan is a bit of a cliché, but it just seems so right somehow and added to the peaceful ambience of this special place.

We also visited the Peace Park, which is dedicated to disarmament and consists of a huge, and in all honesty, hideous, statue which is supposed to signify letting go of the past and looking to a peaceful future. This statue is at one end of an avenue with lovely fountains at the other end; these resemble either an angel's or a crane's wings, depending on your belief system. There are memorials given by many of the nations of the world and we are not being jingoistic when we say that we thought the New Zealand one was the most beautiful and tasteful of all. It was a stainless steel korowai – the traditional Maori ceremonial cape.



Peace Park statue



New Zealand's Memorial



Wings of an Angel or a Crane?

In the afternoon we took a walk off the ship straight into a lovely 'old' township area (there's not much that's old in Nagasaki), with cobbled streets and funny little shops and stalls selling worryingly enormous oranges, some as big as a baby's head, cakes, lollies and we-know-not-what else, but all was bright and colourful. A wander up a people-free, winding path took us to an amazing cemetery, with huge grey marble tombs, all beautifully looked after and the inscriptions freshly gold-leafed. There was a particularly beautiful temple complex, all grey, white and black and such a change from the rather gaudy ones we had seen elsewhere. It was a beautiful, tranquil spot and right in the middle of a built up area with flats and a school forming the boundaries of the cemetery. A bonus was to hear the school choir practicing what sounded like a lovely hymn as we walked around.



Cemetery gate



Marble tombs



Huge oranges

We'd had mixed feelings about going to Nagasaki, and thought it might be very distressing but it was one of the most peaceful and friendly cities we have ever visited. Even the traffic was quiet and the drivers were patient, and there was no jostling on the crowded pavements. It was almost as if the general acceptance that the worst had happened and the collective consciousness of the population was that there was no point in stressing about minor irritations. A perfect day was rounded off by an excellent school band and some very polished drum majorettes doing a march-and-dance routine as we sailed away. The ship was built by Mitsubishi in Nagasaki and the people who built it have a great affection for it, which showed in the 'Welcome Home' banners and the emotional farewell by the hundreds of citizens who turned up to wave us off.

April 3rd – At Sea

A very rough sea and rainy weather, with further gales forecast, kept us indoors as we made our way to Shanghai. We were very glad we do not suffer from the 'motion of the ocean' but felt sympathy for those who do; the dining room was sparsely populated that lunchtime. It eased off as the afternoon and evening wore on and fortunately we were not delayed.

April 4th - Shanghai

A fine day in Shanghai. Please see *China – Ancient & Modern* for a full account of our time there.

April 5th & 6th – At Sea

Calm seas and warm but hazy weather meant that the swimming pools and outdoor facilities were fully utilised, mostly by Europeans who did not understand the strength of the sun through the haze. The lobsters at dinner had plenty of competition and several ladies clashed rather regrettably with their pink, orange or red evening dresses.

April 7th – Hong Kong, China

We disembarked early in order to spend as much time as possible with our friends, Dee and Geoff Lovegrove, our neighbours when we lived in Hong Kong in the late '80s. Please see *China – Ancient & Modern* for a full account of our visit.

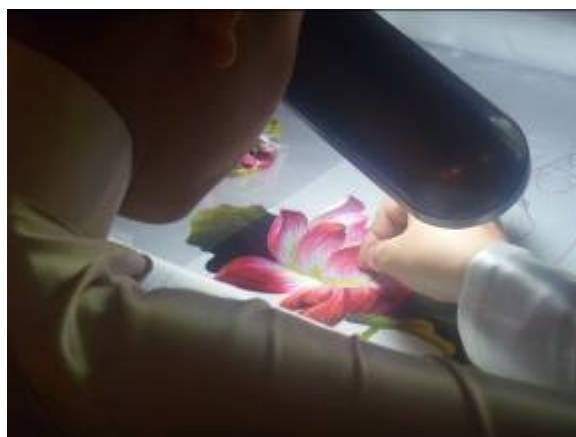
April 8th – At Sea

It was Easter Day and another beautiful day at sea. There were plenty of activities on board for the energetic, as well as Church services for all denominations. We had a lazy day reading and listening to music. Very pleasant!

April 9th – Nha Trang, Vietnam

We had a very full and fascinating day at Nha Trang. Because we knew there would be lots to do and no public transport to speak of, we took an excellent, semi-private tour organised by one of the Cruise Critic* members on board. There were 23 of us and everyone really gelled well, with no dissenters, so we saw everything we wanted and nothing we didn't. While we were waiting for the bus to depart, we were interested to see a fisherman rowing through the harbour in his coracle – just like those found in Wales!

The silk embroidery factory, which was a highlight for Sarah, was amazing and even Martin, and the other men who went on sufferance, were impressed with the workmanship (all done by hand) and beautiful pictures and artefacts made here. The fine silk organza pictures which were the same front and back defied belief and Sarah still doesn't know how they do them, even though we were able to see the girls at work and watched really closely ... it makes her cross stitch look very crude!



Front



Back

Next on the agenda was a visit to The Pagoda Orphanage. We weren't at all sure about this but are now glad we went as the children were lively and, apart from a couple of shy preschoolers, all very smiley. They were clearly well nourished and cared for with affection. The 'mother' was an old lady of about 80 who set the orphanage up after the war and has built it up to include a school, temple (hence the pagoda) and nursery for children from birth to 15. Her youngest charge is a little boy of 4 months who was born without arms and dumped on her doorstep - he's no use to his parents if he can't work on their farm. We saw the school children at play and in their classrooms and they were so eager to show us their work. They are probably more fortunate than many of their peers in normal families as they are all taught a trade as well as educated to school certificate level, so will have no difficulty finding good jobs.

Two of the 'old girls' became nuns and have gone back to help look after the children. The picture shows them sorting and cleaning ants from some buns which the children were going to have for morning break; note the haircuts. Also, look at the strange haircuts which some of the little boys have – sorry about the quality of the photos, the little imps didn't stay still for a moment! We noticed that it was only the lively, cheeky boys who got the hairstyle, so maybe it has something to do with identifying trouble makers! At the

embroidery factory there was a picture of children playing and in it all the boys had the same cut, so it must be a tradition.



Pagoda Orphanage



Traditional haircuts



Old Girls – now returned as nuns



'Mother' and nannies nursing the baby

A ride back through the city and into the countryside took us past a huge, white Buddha and hundreds of ducks being herded like cattle towards their pond, paddy fields being worked by women in the traditional conical hats and a man with an ancient wooden plough, pulled by an equally ancient ox. We also saw unrefined rice laid out on tarpaulins on the side of the road, with an old man winnowing it by walking up and down, kicking it with his bare feet to sort the grains from the chaff.



Herding ducks



Working the fields by hand



and with ox and plough

We then visited a rice-paper factory, which was quite a highlight: The rice 'paper' is actually rice spring roll wraps and noodles and the process is archaic to say the least. There is too much to go into detail but involves battered bowls and buckets of rice starch gloop and less-than-pristine bamboo drying racks; you can see from the photos some of the work going on in what could be described as 'Hell's Kitchen' - we all went outside to stand in the cool of the sun (only 32C outside, about 50C inside!). The only difference

between the yellow and white is the addition of an artificial colouring agent to the yellow; it looked exactly like school poster paint powder but couldn't have been, could it?



'Hell's kitchen'



Drying rice paper

A stop at a village showed us a family of women making the traditional conical hats, which was quite complicated and it was astonishing how quickly they did all the work, without looking at what they were doing. It is a dying skill as the market has dwindled since the new law which means that everyone has to wear crash helmets on their bikes and motor bikes or scooters, the most common forms of transport in Vietnam. We missed the sight of the gorgeous girls in their long, flowing robes and conical hats riding their scooters - it was one of our lasting impressions of our first visit to Vietnam many years ago. We suppose we ought to be glad that safety has taken over. In fact, nowadays, the girls not only wear crash helmets, they also wear floppy hats, track suits, gloves, masks, which we assumed was to protect them from the fumes and grazes in a fall but is apparently because they don't want any exposure to the sun. They consider milky white skin to be a sign of beauty, and evidence that they are 'refined' and not farm labourers. Colour prejudice is not confined to the West, it seems!



Hat makers



Fishing boats at Nha Trang (our ship in background)

We then got taken to the river to board a boat - a precarious enterprise to say the least as it was a matter of clambering down some earth 'steps' roughly hacked into the river bank and onto the open boat. We were glad the earth was dry as had it been muddy it would have been a very different experience. We had a peaceful half-hour run through some river-side scenery, with rice stalk stooks and old houses, before we got to the restaurant where we had a lovely lunch and an hour to relax.

After lunch we were reunited with our bus and taken back towards the city, where we stopped at an ancient Hindu temple, a bit like the Khmer ones in Cambodia. It was up a lot of steep steps so, again, Sarah stayed down below while Martin went to see the towers. The most interesting part of that visit, however, took place at street level, where there was an extremely elaborate funeral in progress - the hearse had to be seen to be believed, so much gold painted decoration, dragons and goodness know what. We took a few discreet photos from across the road but did not wish to intrude by going closer.



Hindu temple towers & ruins



Funeral procession & ornately decorated hearse

* www.cruisecritic.com Cruise Critic is a website which is run for the information and amusement of regular cruise-goers. As well as information about cruises and the best deals, silly snippets and observations, it also provides an opportunity for people booked on a given cruise to make contact in advance. There is often a get-together on board at the start of the cruise and it is great if you find like-minded people who, for example, would be happy to share a taxi or explore new ports together. It is also increasingly common for tailor-made tours such as this one to be organised (we also did a couple in Iceland last year). Everyone is either an experienced traveller or has enough savvy not to want to be part of the herd and wheeled into every souvenir shop or gem factory on the route. A significant bonus is that the tours are also usually much less expensive than the ship's ones.

April 10th – Phu My, Vietnam

This was the least interesting port on our itinerary but gave rise to the most excitement: Apparently a small container ship with 60 containers aboard had a collision in the night - with what they weren't saying - and promptly sunk in the middle of the main shipping channel into the port in the Saigon River. We sat out at sea, outside Phu My, while the authorities assessed whether it was safe to proceed as they didn't yet know if the containers which fell overboard were causing a hazard, and also whether the barge itself was causing a blockage. It was only 6.30am and the Captain was hopeful that we might still be able to make port, and that the tours would still take place. After many "yes we are", "no we aren't" announcements, 9.30am came and Captain told us that we were definitely going to Phu My and should only be four hours late. He would try not to hit any floating containers on the way!



Clearing the channel of containers



Phu My fishing boat

We sure do get involved in some adventures when we're travelling, don't we?! Some people must think we make them up or at least play them up, but we don't! Life really is that interesting! Unlike Phu My...

Actually Phu My is only a container port and the town is called Ba Ria. You can look at it two ways: Either it's a small, local Vietnamese Market town with nothing of interest to those with no interest in how the local people live but wanting only to buy tourist souvenirs, or it's a small, local Vietnamese Market town with things of interest to those with no interest in tourist souvenirs but who want to see how the local people live. Guess which category we fell into.

To be honest, an hour was all it took to see it - including a supermarket with a wide variety of recognisable goods but a display of durian in the fruit & veg department which smelled so bad that it made our eyes water, so we beat a retreat! A durian, for those of you fortunate enough never to have come into contact with one, is a large, green, spiky fruit with a pale yellow interior which tastes delicious, but only if one has no sense of smell; its stench has to be experienced to be believed! The indoor market had all sorts of hardware stalls selling kitchen and household goods as well as food stalls selling unidentifiable and distinctly unappetising foodstuffs. The bus stop for our shuttle back to the ship was right outside KFC (even more ubiquitous than McDonalds in Vietnam) where a lot of people headed as soon as we arrived, to get a fix of 'real' (!) food. Having eaten, most then got back on the bus to return to the ship without having begun to explore the town or markets.

Several people complained about the town, lack of tourist shops and general tattiness of it all (this is still a third world country), missing the point that it is the nearest port for Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), to which many of the passengers who hadn't been before were taken. It is our opinion that such 'boring' ports actually add to one's understanding and give an insight into the reality of the country visited and so we never mind discovering them.

April 11th – At Sea

A quiet day resting tired feet and gathering our resources for tomorrow's stop in Thailand.

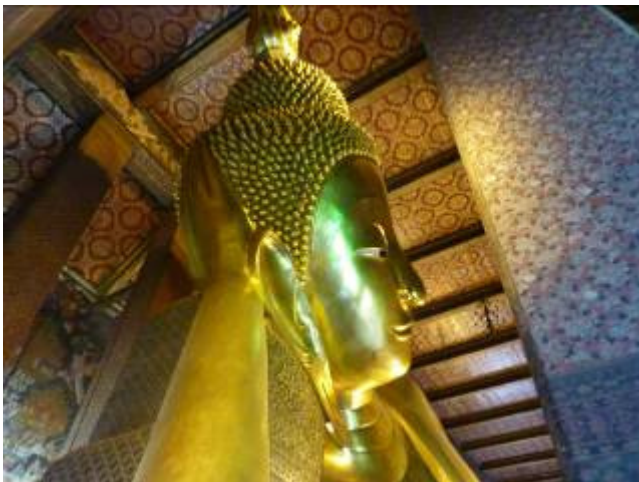
April 12th – Laem Chabang (for Bangkok), Thailand

Although we have been to Bangkok several times and never tire of it, especially the river and canals, which afford such rich and colourful glimpses of a life and culture so different from our own, we had booked an afternoon and evening sight-seeing and shopping tour, as logistics made it the only way to do what we wanted in the time available. In the morning we stayed on the ship, except for a foray into the shops in the quayside terminal. We bought ourselves four lovely silk cushion covers. We got a good discount as we were the first customers of the day and were intrigued that the shop-keeper took the money and before putting it in the till, touched every article in the shop with it for good luck. She was obviously quite serious and was uttering some sort of incantation as she did it. It provided a fascinating insight into local lore.

We left by coach for Bangkok from the port of Laem Chabang for a drive that could take over 2 hours but fortunately it was a holiday so traffic was light and it only took us an hour and a half. Then we had a

bonus as we were transferred to a river boat because the city centre was closed to traffic as the king was returning to his palace after the funeral of his niece. The holiday also meant that the streets would be crowded.

We had a lovely refreshing ride on the river, past the Royal Palace, to the Temple of the Reclining Buddha (so huge that it was almost impossible to photograph him in his entirety) where we spent a little too long (it was 35C and 97% humidity with little shade) examining all the different aspects of the Temple. Having said that, we couldn't have done it any more quickly as there was so much to see and our guide was very informative. He told us that that this temple housed what is believed to be the first school of chiropractic, with the original diagrams still visible on the wall of the school. Although we had visited this temple a couple of times in the past, this was the first time we had heard of this. We also learned about the various rituals being performed. It was the Buddhist New Year and they have a water festival which involved pouring a little scented water on each of a series of golden Buddha statues, walking through a mist of 'Holy' water and so on. It was all very colourful and interesting.



Reclining Buddha



Reclining Buddha's feet



Anointing the Buddha statues with scented water



Roofs of the temple complex

Back on the boat, we went on a tour of the klongs (canals) and saw the royal barges, lots of ramshackle houses on stilts and several temples. We then stopped to feed the catfish - they obviously know the sound of the tour boats as they swarmed round us as soon as we stopped. All the ladies on board (why not the men?) were given stale bread rolls to throw in and the feeding frenzy was quite something. Some of the fish were enormous but they were so quick it was hard to get a picture. We then were taken to a hotel where the bus was waiting (as were clean loos!) and we went to a gem factory and handicrafts shop - what a surprise!



Typical klong (canal) dwelling



Wat Arun - Temple of Dawn

The guide said it was compulsory for him to take us but not compulsory for us to buy - and there was complimentary soft drinks, beer and coffee or tea, if anyone wanted them. We knew this was the place for proper Thai silk, as we'd been before, so Sarah was pleased that they had exactly the colour and quality she wanted to make a jacket, and at a reasonable price, too

Dinner was a sumptuous buffet at the Ramada Hotel, right on the waterfront, The food was a mixture of salads and seafood, chicken, chops and steaks for you to choose from and have cooked to order, Japanese and Chinese dishes and, of course, the most amazing Thai specialties. Martin likes green papaya salad and a sign said that it was available, so he asked one of the chefs who promptly made him one from scratch - all to himself!

Last on the agenda was a visit to Patpong's Night Market. This was just as we remembered it and so was the bar and girly scene! No, we didn't go to any of the bars or clubs! Actually, Sarah rather cramped Martin's style; at one point she popped into an hotel to use their loo and he carried on walking through the market - he said he definitely got better offers when she wasn't with him! Sallie had a hankering for a TAG Heuer ladies' dive watch but at roughly US\$2000 she isn't ever likely to get one! We struck lucky when a stall holder fished under the counter for a convincing one which actually had the proper red & green TAG logo. Sarah's embarrassingly impressive bargaining skills got it down to a sensible price, and we walked away not only victorious but astonished that we'd got exactly what we went for ... not a lot of people do that. P.S. Six weeks later it is still going strong!

We didn't get back until 11.15pm but the shops on the quayside were still in full swing so we went back to our cushion cover lady and bought two more covers to go with the ones we'd got in the morning, to use up our few remaining baht. We were her first and last customers and she gave us the covers for the same price as before - then gave us back some of the money for our own good luck!

April 13th & 14th – At Sea

Calm seas and warm weather meant a relaxing couple of days in the fresh air. At one point there was some excitement when the Captain announced a waterspout (it would be called a tornado on land) on the horizon. We looked out for it and spotted the phenomenon which we commonly see from home ... and simply refer to as "rain out to sea"; we are obviously far too blasé about these things!

April 15th – Singapore (our disembarkation port)

We were able to disembark in record time and took a taxi to town. We couldn't help noticing how polite Singaporean road signs are, compared with China: 'Please do not stop your car in the tunnel' as opposed to 'No stopping!' for example. We soon arrived at the Novotel on Clarke Quay, where we had arranged to rendezvous with our niece, Becky, who lives in Singapore.

After a delicious breakfast at one of her favourite cafes, we set off to Holland Village, an old haunt from our days when we lived in Singapore. There was an ulterior motive as Martin was half-looking for a particular amplifier and we had been told of a good shop there. It was a sad disappointment and we wondered why it had been recommended. Becky was on the case, however, and messaged a friend who

is apparently as much of an enthusiast as Martin and he suggested a couple of shopping malls dedicated to such merchandise.

We had been to a superb restaurant last time we were in Singapore and decided to repeat the experience this time. Their crispy baby squid in a mild chili sauce is the most delicious food ever eaten by anyone anywhere (in our humble opinion!) and we made complete pigs of ourselves feasting on said squid plus an enormous crab and, for the sake of nutritional virtue, some steamed kang kong, a tasty green vegetable.

In the afternoon we took a ride on the tourist river boat, round to Marina Bay and the Merlion Park. It astonished us how much had changed in the three years since we were last there. The Marina Bay Sands hotel was the most jaw-dropping sight and although pictures of it and its rooftop infinity pool had done the rounds on the internet, nothing prepared us for the reality.

Our photos will give you some idea of the hotel and also the stunning architecture in this most progressive city. We were particularly amused by the Supreme Court which resembles, and is nicknamed 'The Durian'. This seemed somewhat ironic to us as the ghastly pungency of this fruit has caused it to be banned from public transport, hotels and government buildings!



The 'Durian'



Marina Bay Sands Hotel



Merlion & cityscape

We rounded off the day with cocktails on the waterfront, looking across to the extraordinary theme park which Sentosa Island has become. When Sarah lived in Singapore as a child, it was a mysterious place called Blaka(ng) Mati (or a variation thereof) where all sorts of sinister going-on were rumoured. No doubt the grown-ups knew but the children were happy to indulge in their fantasies of the unknown! Sadly it was then time to bid Becky a fond farewell so she could catch her flight to London.

April 16th – still Singapore

This was 'Shopping Day' and after packing, checking out and storing our luggage at the hotel, we started off by visiting those specialist hi-fi malls, where Martin discovered to his chagrin that the particular amplifier he sought was no longer being imported.

At lunchtime, we looked in vain for one of the many local hawker centres which we used to frequent when we lived there in the '80s. These were where we enjoy our favourite local dishes but, sadly, they all seem to have been gentrified and we now found only rather chichi restaurants selling somewhat less interesting 'international' cuisine. They do still exist but it was difficult for tourists to find the 'real' ones, as opposed to the rather westernised ones, endorsed by the Tourism Authority.

A taxi took us to the airport where we caught our Jetstar flight to Auckland, arriving the next morning. We then made our onward connection to Kerikeri, where our car was awaiting us. Dinner with the family and an exchange of the latest news ended a fascinating month of travel.