

Real world lessons in South Korea

BY MARK GUPPY

SEOUL, South Korea (CUP) — City of my dreams, Seoul, South Korea. It's a never-ending sea of concrete and neon. Other people like the green rolling hills and the ancient temples associated with the Far East, but for me I sing the praises of a city that never sleeps.

The year that I spent in South Korea was tough — I loathed teaching children. However, I fell in love with living in Asia. Cheap cigarettes and alcohol were available, and the temperature never dipped below -20° Celsius.

For a prairie boy this was heaven.

I lived in a comfy little concrete box and discovered the joys of a mass transit system that actually worked.

I had signed a contract as a teaching instructor with a large corporation. Although I didn't like what I did to pay the bills, in many ways it was a more positive work environment than what I was used to in North America.

Bosses on this side of the ocean love to throw tantrums, but in Korea management doesn't like to lose face by going apeshit. You may be screwed if the boss doesn't like you, but at least he or she doesn't scream at you under the delusion that this is some sort of impressive management technique.

In the corporate world, Seoul is a beautiful illustration of Darwin's survival of the fittest in action. Asia can chew people up

and spit them out. When I arrived I was just another nobody from the middle of nowhere — Winnipeg, Manitoba to be exact.

I started teaching right off the plane. As a new teacher I was initially popular with the students, and my academic supervisor, Esther, was happy to see the enrolment rates go up.

I did, however, have classroom management problems that became more apparent by the end of the second month.

The novelty had worn off and I had no idea how to draw up a lesson plan, so the kids were bored most of the time.

By the end of my second month my enrolment rates had dipped and my supervisor wasn't too happy. She made it clear that if my performance didn't improve drastic measures would have to be taken.

Initially I thought this meant that she would fire me, but later I found out it meant she would make my working life a living hell for the duration of the contract.

Esther liked self-starters, but when she did the make the threat she gave me all the resources that I needed to become a better teacher. She sent me to seminars at the head office, and got my roommate Chris to act as a mentor in the classroom.

By the third month I had my job down pat — it was obvious that I was no Mr. Kotter, but on the other hand, I knew I was going to get through the year with my sanity more or less intact.

The extra training paid off big time.

By November one of my fellow staff members had it in for me because the supervisor gave me her overtime. It felt good — especially since we never really got along.

It pays to keep your nose clean in Asia, because your boss doesn't care where you are from, or who your parents are. All that matters is keeping those enrolment rates up. Hardworking teachers are always rewarded.

Most of the staff was all right. They were usually Canadians or Americans, but I did work with an Irish girl. You have to be a little crazy to teach kids to begin with, and this sort of work is bound to attract eccentric people.

Working with the other foreigners could be even more difficult than working with the Korean teachers. Class, gender, sexual orientation, region and ethnicity were all flash points for disagreement.

Were we bad people? I don't think so, but the close quarters of our living and working arrangements tended to magnify differences.

However, more often than not, our "bohemianism" was a strong bond.

We were a pretty secular bunch, and most of us weren't there to partake in the traditional symbols of North American success.

Rock music, denim, basketball (or soccer), Budweiser and English pretty much leveled all the differences between people.

For better or worse, the distinctions we make between people aren't based on manners, customs or taste anymore, but cold, hard cash.

Everyone was on the make. The living wasn't easy, but there were plenty of opportunities for quick cash if a foreigner was

willing to take advantage of them.

It was possible to make up to an extra \$1,000 a month working illegally in Korea — if you have a pager you're in business.

But working illegally didn't always pan out. Every spring, immigration officials would crack down on English teachers working illegally in Seoul.

Sometimes carrying books in the wrong part of town was enough to get a foreigner arrested and deported. The fine came to about a \$1,000, and they rode you out of town on a rail.

Yet as long as you weren't stupid you wouldn't get caught.

Another strange thing about working privately was that it was sometimes easy to forget that I was living in a foreign country.

Somebody set up an interview with me — they wanted me to tutor their children — and I was greeted at the door by a young boy who spoke flawless English.

It was like I had never left Canada. In fact, the boy's family had just come back from an extended stay in Alberta.

There were a lot of things that an English instructor could do after a hard day's work in Seoul. Smoking cigarettes and counting the cracks in the ceiling is one thing that I'd done on more than one occasion.

Cigarettes are dirt cheap, about \$1.30 a pack.

And when I had money I went nightclubbing with friends and co-workers.

Sometimes money wasn't necessary — drinks were free if you knew the right people.

When I arrived in the summer of 1997, the money was still good, and continued into part of the fall. If you were short money there was always someone willing to lend you some Won

(Korean currency).

People became more careful after the IMF crisis in December 1997.

Germans, Israelis, embassy officials, military types and business people rubbed shoulders with humble English teachers from North America.

Of course when I wanted to see the sun rise it was time to climb up Hooker Hill.

Every foreigner has to see Hooker Hill at some point during his or her stay in Korea.

The walk was tough, but it was always possible to take a breather and buy some ramyon (noodles) from one of the vendors.

Seoul is a very modern city. Most of it was destroyed during the Korean war, but there were palaces and temples as old as anything found in Europe.

And Spring was beautiful. Cherry blossoms bloomed like pink snow in the trees. I can't imagine anything more beautiful than a cherry blossom in spring. The Buddhist temples had a similar fragile beauty with their baroque iconography. If you focused you could smell the incense in the air.

The second last month of my contract was the hardest. I was working 50 hours a week, and didn't know what I was going to do next. It occurred to me that I should teach adults in Japan.

There aren't any comforting conclusions that can be drawn here. While I did miss North America, I didn't feel anything when I came back to Winnipeg. I missed my family, but only my immediate family lives in this city. Most of my friends had left Winnipeg to look for work.

So it's back to square one again. But it's all right, 'cause I've already been there before.

gotta be KO



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