

## Shanghaied

### Day 1 Part 1

#### **“Wall-mart is like this in your country, isn’t it?”**

If I’m honest, brutally honest, I really wasn’t looking forward to spending two weeks in Shanghai. It’s not that I didn’t want to see China at some point in my life, though quite a few countries were higher on the old ‘to visit’ list, and it’s not as if I don’t like an adventure, but for some reason, as I boarded my first flight from Glasgow International, I felt rather gloomy about the prospect. There were a number of reasons for my reticence, and most of them had nothing to do with Shanghai or China whatsoever.

First, it would be the first time I’d be away from my 2 and a half year old son, Dashiell, for more than 4 days, not to mention my wife Michelle, who was expecting our second child. Somehow a dodgy skype connection - was skype even permitted in the PRC? - wasn’t going to make up for all that time away. I figured Dash would be fine - after all, he’d be spending a fortnight with his grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins - but I wasn’t quite so sure about myself. How much would he change in two weeks? How much would I miss? I also worried about Michelle, who was just about to transcend the nausea-inducing first trimester for a hopefully, more comfortable second trimester. I prayed that the tail of the first wouldn’t bite her somewhere over Greenland with Dashiell just fallen asleep and all the toilets engaged.

Second, I had a hell of a lot of work to get done. With a baby due at the end of the year, I had to get my next book written by December; otherwise, it would likely be swallowed up in a sea of dirty nappies, spit-up and 3 am treks in the damp dark to get the new baby to fall asleep. I also had a new class to prepare for and whole host of smaller things to get finished. To top it all, we were moving to a different building at work and I needed to sort my office out. Skipping out of the country for two weeks might be enticing, but I dreaded what would greet me upon my return.

Finally, I had my concerns about just what I’d be doing at good old Shanghai University. My colleague, Jim, who had roped me into the trip after he couldn’t make it himself (see, I was sort of Shanghaied), said in his inimitable Brummie fashion that it would be a

complete lark, a few days teaching and the rest soaking up the sights and sounds of exquisite Shanghai. But, if the ever-increasing numbers of emails I was receiving from my contacts at the University of Shanghai were any indication, the expectations of what I was meant to do were increasing like the Chinese population before the one-child policy kicked in. That, and I had a sinking feeling about getting reimbursed for my very expensive flight; they hadn't asked for any bank details, so how was I going to get paid?

I tried to put these concerns out of my mind by focussing on the immediate. And the first challenge I had to face was simply getting through the flights, ideally with a few hours of sleep. If you put Glasgow to Shanghai into a search engine of your choosing, you get an astonishing myriad of choices. There are, understandably, no direct flights, but every major city in the north-eastern quarter of the globe seemed to be a potential link between the Second City of Empire and the bustling heart of China's economy. Sure, London was a European option, but so was Paris, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Berlin, Moscow. Or if I wanted to get more exotic, I could fly to Dubai and connect from there. Even within East Asia there were options. I could be re-routed through Tokyo, Beijing, and a number of other locales.

Now, search engines of this sort can be a great convenience, but I wish they could be a wee bit more, well, selective. As I trawled through all of my choices, calculating how long I'd have to wait at various airports, comparing prices, adding up the total length of flights, looking at the times, the number of transfers and how many airlines might be involved, it soon occurred to me that, out of all of these options, precious few were remotely feasible, let alone attractive. Paris Charles de Gaulle is a much nicer airport than it used to be, but what would compel me to wait there for 6 hours, awaiting a transfer to Shanghai? I know some people like to holiday in Dubai, but as a connection between Glasgow and Shanghai? Not the shortest distance between two points, methinks. And why would I choose to fly with two or three airlines, when one would do just fine? Sounds like a good way to lose one's luggage to me. Not surprisingly, the cheapest options were also the daftest.

After what felt like a week of sorting through itineraries planned by a chimpanzee on cocaine, I honed in on the only acceptable flight. It wasn't cheap, which hopefully wouldn't be a problem, but it would involve only one airline, have me transfer in Amsterdam, a perfectly palatable airport (any airport that sells tulip bulbs in its shops is all right by me)

and, most important, was fantastically timed. My outbound flight from Glasgow was scheduled for 16:45, meaning I could get out and do something, most likely go and purchase some toothpaste or a Chinese outlet convertor. An hour or so later I would arrive in Amsterdam, and would have less than two hours to get something to eat, or learn about tulips. With the time change, the next flight would be just before 21:00, giving me enough time to eat a terrible airline meal, spoil a much-anticipated film by watching it on a 6 by 8 inch screen and, mercifully, get a few hours of sleep before arriving in Shanghai at 14:30 the next afternoon.

And, as it turned out, the flights went about as well as could be expected. I even experienced a bit of luck along the way, since the flight to Amsterdam earlier in the day had been cancelled, nettling the Netherlanders and galling the Glaswegians who had lost out. The flight itself was blissfully unremarkable, and I had a splendid prawn and smoked salmon salad with 500 ml of Belgian beer at an airport restaurant. Amsterdam to Shanghai was similarly hassle-free. The meal - I chose the 'Chinese-style' fish - hinted positively of Shanghai's culinary promise, and I managed to stay awake through most of 'Argo', although the crappy headphones prevented me from absorbing some of the subtleties, if any were present. Above all, I actually got some sleep. My 40 winks were not bursting with either quantity or quality - I was sat beside the rather noisy kitchen/gossip-zone/trolley park area of the 747 - but it wasn't terrible. As much as 6 or 7 hours maybe, though most of that has to be described as dozing, rather than proper sleeping, and I probably woke up two dozen times. But not bad. I had recently braved the Caledonian (no)Sleeper from Glasgow to London and that made my Shanghai flight seem like one of Sleeping Beauty's deepest, darkest nights.

As far as who I shared the flight with, well, it was a mixed crew to say the least. There were certainly plenty of Chinese people, and plenty of Dutch folk, from what I could tell, but I also heard American, Australian, Slavic, German, French-Canadian, and a variety of British accents. The fellow beside me was a good example of this variety. Of south Asian background, he had trained as a dentist before taking on his family's Manchester-based women's clothing company. They specialised in underwear, making me immediately think of Coronation Street's Underworld. Although he often came to Shanghai for business, this particular trip was connected to an MBA he was doing - essentially a jolly dressed up as an educational experience. He, just like Jim, assured me I would have a fine time in Shanghai.