

'A comparison with Fawlty Towers is inevitable, but this is funnier' Mail On Sunday

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

FIVE YEARS IN TIBET

ALEC LE SUEUR



First published 1998
Reprinted 1998, 1999, 2002 and 2005
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Summersdale Publishers Ltd
46 West Street
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 1RP
UK

www.summersdale.com

Printed and bound by Haynes.

ISBN 1 84024 199 3

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FIVE YEARS IN TIBET

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s u m m e r s d a l e

To Conny and the Lhasa Loonies

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YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

Flight SZ 504 with 83 passengers on board descended through the grey drizzle shrouding Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport. It was the morning of 31 August 1988. The usual close-up view of the thousands of television aerials, atop the dirty skyscrapers of Kowloon, was obscured by a dense fog. The control tower radioed its last message to flight SZ 504 at 9:14 in the morning:

'All clear for landing.'

Kai Tak's runway, a narrow strip of reclaimed land extending across the polluted waters of Hong Kong harbour, was buried deep in the drizzle. Pilot Zhou Feng Li and the five crew who crowded the cabin of the Chinese flight were unconcerned. Kai Tak airport had an excellent safety record. The last accident had been in 1967. Nothing could go wrong.

Flight SZ 504 was destined to change Kai Tak airport's safety statistics as it skidded across the runway, plunging into the murky harbour and breaking apart on impact with the water. Rescue teams were at the scene almost immediately but tragically seven people died: one passenger, and the six crew who had been standing nonchalantly in the cabin without wearing seat-belts.

I sat in the departure lounge of Kai Tak airport on that same day, waiting to board my first ever flight on CAAC, China's national airline, on my first trip into China and Tibet.

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While they combed the runway for parts of the fuselage of the old CAAC Trident I had a seven hour delay in which to contemplate my decision to work in this country: a place I had never been to, an airline with rather obvious disadvantages and a two year contract in one of the remotest parts of the world.

Just one month earlier I had travelled from Europe to Hong Kong with my short resumé typed out as lengthily as possible and my best English suit packed. I was looking for a job in the luxury hotels of the Orient – reputedly where the finest hotels in the world are found. If I had done my homework properly I would have known that you do not visit Hong Kong in a thick, heavy woollen suit in the height of summer, but it was my first time in the tropics and I had much to learn. Dripping with perspiration from the sweltering, humid heat of Hong Kong, with my sodden suit clinging to my body as if it was made of neoprene, I entered the Holiday Inn offices for the last interview of my trip.

As interviews go it was a disaster from the beginning. I was only there because the helpful gentleman I had seen at The Peninsula had recommended that I see his friend at Holiday Inn, but my heart was not set on it. There is a tremendous snobbery built in with hotel work. For some reason it is assumed that if you work in a five star hotel you are automatically part of an elite upper class of hoteliers who mingle at ease with the rich and famous. As the reason behind my trip to Asia was to continue my career in luxury hotels I was infected with this snobbery and had little interest in working for Holiday Inn.

The high powered air-conditioning in the office swept through my dripping suit and I shivered uncontrollably as

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I chilled to the bone. The lady conducting the interview was kind enough not to make any comment on this, for which I was very thankful, but from both sides the interview was going nowhere. We chatted for a while. All I wanted to do was to leave this refrigerator room as soon as possible. Even the sticky heat outside would be preferable to freezing in my own perspiration.

I made to leave. ‘Thank you for coming. Don’t call us, we’ll call you,’ said from both sides with polite hoteliers’ sincerity and with smiles all round. As I was leaving the room I casually mentioned that I would love to go to Lhasa, as I had seen a brochure for the Lhasa Hotel outside her office. From that moment my fate was sealed.

‘You mean you *want* to work in Lhasa?!’ was the incredulous response to my passing remark. The door was closed behind me and before I had turned around my interviewer was on the phone to the company’s Vice President.

I had to face him that day, as the next morning I would be returning to my job in Paris. Still wondering what I had let myself in for, I entered his office; an elegant apartment decorated with immense scrolls of Chinese calligraphy. Some of the scrolls had merely a few characters messily swiped over the rice paper with a large brush. It looked to me like the scribbling of a child let loose with a pot of black poster paint. My host, appreciating my observation of the calligraphy pointed out the red chops on each scroll that showed we were looking at works of art from great Chinese masters. From the Chinese writing he read the names out to me and I nodded in admiration of these masterpieces, wondering how much one got paid

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for producing these things and whether my little nieces could be millionaires before the age of ten.

The Vice President swivelled pensively on his chair: a sumptuous black leather swivel chair, from which he made decisions every day concerning the multi-million dollar Chinese empire of Holiday Inn. This was the person who would decide the future direction of my career. Broad shoulders, a large square face with a mop of grey hair and thin wire-framed spectacles added to his sombre and learned appearance. He nodded for me to sit down and then proceeded to scrutinise me in detail. The intensity of his look and the wry smile on his face were unnerving and, not quite knowing where to look, my eyes darted from his face to the scrolls on the wall, to the spectacular view of Hong Kong from his window.

Crimson and silver taxis edged along the congested streets far below us in a world which was miles away. It is strange to see the world from above. Somehow it is a private place which humans were never meant to see, like the kitchens of a restaurant or the bathrooms of royalty.

Far below, perspiring heads glimmered in the sunlight. Litter and fallen laundry covered every ledge and portico beneath the high-rise. Daylight betrayed the rusting brackets of the neon street signs which crept even this high up the skyscrapers. Unsightly air-conditioning units jutted out of the exterior walls, spewing annoying little drops of water onto the hapless pedestrians far below.

This last thought on the air-conditioning brought my mind back to the present. I was decidedly uncomfortable. My suit had still not dried out, and the Vice President's grey eyes, enlarged by the thick glass of his bifocals, continued to stare at me, penetrating my inner thoughts.

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After several minutes of silence he tilted back in his chair and spoke with a deep, slow, authoritative voice:

‘So, young man, you are going to be the Sales and Marketing Manager. You are going to spend six months a year in Tibet with the yaks and six months a year screwing your brains out in Hong Kong. How does that sound to you?’

Startled by his own question he jumped suddenly from his chair and nervously asked me not to repeat what he had just said. Trying to regain his composure he sank uneasily back into his swivel chair and gave me some advice on survival in China. He had worked there for many years and was reputed to know the system better than anyone.

‘Be careful,’ he said, ‘it is not like the Western world.’ He paused. ‘When you see a local girl just remember this one proverb: You can’t try the shirt on before you buy it.’

Not really certain what he was on about I nodded in agreement.

‘They will be watching you,’ he continued. ‘Remember, even when you break wind they will know it. Be careful.’

With these last words fixed in my mind and still wondering why I should be buying shirts with local girls, I returned to Paris to hand in my notice.

‘Where are you going Alec? The George V? The Ritz? Back to London?’

‘No, I am joining Holiday Inn.’

‘Holiday Inn?!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why? Which one?’

‘Lhasa.’

‘Lhasa?’ he repeated, looking quizzically at me.

‘Yes. Lhasa. Tibet.’ I answered.

He could barely bring himself to whisper: ‘Au Tibet?! Au Tibet?! Au Tibet?!’

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The drizzle and fog at Kai Tak airport had cleared and I watched with a morbid fascination as the airport engineers hoisted the nose of the plane out of the water. I am not a nervous flier but I must admit to being more than a little apprehensive as later that day we took off on CAAC's flight SZ 4401 – over the remains of SZ 504.

I told myself that even CAAC couldn't down two of its own planes in the same day and I closed my eyes to let my mind wonder what the future had in store for me.

Tibet. What had I done? Why was I leaving my comfortable job in a luxurious Paris hotel? Instead of walking the Champs Elysée to work, where would I be now? Why wasn't I returning to the family home in the Channel Islands, where I could be now, with all the love of wonderful, caring parents?

Despite my homesick thoughts I knew that I was doing the right thing. I was 25 years old, single, and looking for a challenge. Paris had become dull and faded. It was time for something, somewhere, new.

Tibet. Images of a land of magic; towering castles, inhospitable mountain peaks, ancient palaces in swirling mists. Yes, this is what I wanted to find. I had not even set eyes on the place but my heart was burning with desire to be there. Some foreigners are drawn to Tibet for religious or political reasons but I was not in search of discovering myself or freeing a country. I was simply out for adventure.

There were no direct flights to Lhasa. All aircrafts had to land and spend the night in Chengdu: the smelliest city of Sichuan where the sun never shines.

Chengdu is the *ccccrrrrrrrrggggggkkkkhhhhpt* capital of China. This is not a word to be found in the *Oxford English*

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Dictionary, so is not much use for Scrabble, but it does very accurately describe the first sound encountered upon arrival in Chengdu. It is one of the national pastimes of China, and you too can try it when you get there. It issues from as far back down your throat as possible, preferably from somewhere down between your toes, then you pull on the back of your vocal cords, involve your nasal passage somehow, bring it all up and give a good wholesome (and as loud as possible) shot on to the carpet. If there is no carpet available, which there often isn't at Chengdu airport, you may try to get it into one of the brimming spittoons which have been placed for your convenience in the waiting rooms.

Having fun? Well wait until we get to some of the other games they play such as the no-tissue-needed-one-handed-double-nostril-fulsome-snort-onto-the-pavement job. When I pointed out that this wasn't a very pleasant way to blow your nose, I had my first lesson in Chinese etiquette. I was told that our Western method of blowing your nose into a tissue and then putting this paper and its additional contents into your pocket is quite disgusting. They do have a point there. In fact a very good point. How did our Western culture ever develop such a habit? Luckily that is the only tissue waste we put in our pockets. It could have been worse. Much worse.

The adventure had started. This certainly wasn't Paris.

Mr Li, who had picked me up at the airport, told me of all the great sights in Chengdu and asked me why I didn't spend a week there on my way to Lhasa. And anyway, what did I want to go to Lhasa for? It was such a terrible place.

Mr Li, from Hebei province in China, was our man in Chengdu. He spoke fluent English and French, had a

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university degree in mathematics and had a knack of being able to get things done in the most difficult of circumstances. He was hopelessly over-qualified for his job but considered himself extremely fortunate to be in the employment of Holiday Inn Lhasa without being required to work there. His only concern was that his papers were still registered in Tibet and he lived in fear that one day he might be called up. 'I don't want to go there,' he kept repeating, lifting his eyes to the heavens. If there was anything I could do to help him have his papers released he would be most grateful.

Despite Li's enthusiasm for Chengdu, the only point of interest that I could see was the car-wash on the way in from the airport. This was a relatively new concept in China. About two thirds of the way into the city from the airport all cars had to pull off the road into the five lane car wash. Each lane was manned by six people who carelessly sprayed the car with fierce jets of water and scratched it a bit with spiky brushes. Chengdu taxis are not the most robust vehicles in the world and at best you get soaked, at worst the car splutters to a halt with a flooded engine a hundred yards further down the road. Our taxi needed a push to get it going again and although I didn't understand the taxi driver's exact words I certainly understood the gist of what he was saying about the new service. The cost for this obligatory car wash was one dollar. It was explained to me by the cheerful Mr Li that this was a new policy to keep the city of Chengdu clean. This seemed fair enough until Li told me that this was the only car wash in Chengdu, and cars can enter the city as filthy as can be from any other direction.

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Checking-in at the Jin Jiang hotel I met two Canadians completely covered in luminous waterproofs.

‘Going to Tibet?’ one enquired.

‘Good luck!’ added the other.

Greg and Dave were a two man mountaineering team en route for Everest but instead of being at base camp where they had expected to be now, they were drowning their sorrows in the lobby bar of the Jin Jiang hotel. In return for a rather large fortune paid to the Chinese Mountaineering Association they had found their path to Everest blocked by insurmountable piles of red tape. Greg kept showing me the very costly permit which gave them permission to climb Everest. However, the Mountaineering Association had overlooked the fact that they also needed a permit to enter Tibet.

Their argument, that as the mountain was in Tibet, they could not possibly climb it unless they were allowed to enter Tibet, had not convinced the man at the airport. As he was the one wearing the uniform, it was his word that counted.

We commiserated together over dinner. I thought it would cheer them up if we tried the legendary Sichuan cuisine, renowned for its spices and fire. We were joined by Mr Li who assured us that he knew the best place in town: one of the restaurants along the large open sewer which he had mistakenly identified as Chengdu’s main river. I knew that Sichuan food was piquant but the chef’s idea of hot was clearly different from mine. Li devoured his bowl with enthusiasm. I watched the sweat pour off Greg and Dave after their first spoonful of soup, letting off steam in answer to their day’s frustration. My reaction was no better and soon we were reduced to nibbling raw

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cabbage – the only ingredient not to have touched the caustic sauce.

With my mouth still on fire I accompanied Li for the customary evening stroll from the Jin Jiang hotel up to the Chairman Mao statue. Mao stood in the twilight with his arm in Communist salute. Lining the road in front of him were hundreds of street vendors flogging paintings to eager tourists. Capitalism hard at work below the great Communist hero.

One night in Chengdu is always too much and so it was with some relief that I was woken by the phone ringing at four o'clock the next morning. 'Your taxi,' said Mr Li over the phone in a surprisingly cheerful voice for such an early hour, 'it's taking you to the airport.'

Some people panic about flying CAAC, about seeing military on the streets, martial law, tanks . . . but I have always maintained that the scariest person in China is the Chinese taxi driver.

They spend their nights chewing garlic plants and practising malodorous grunts.

Never, *never*, sit in the back of the car. Firstly this annoys the taxi driver intensely (and you want to keep him as relaxed as possible). Secondly, he will spend long periods of time driving at 80 miles an hour down small roads, with his head completely turned to the back of the car so that he can grunt something incomprehensible to you and breathe garlic in your direction.

So, instead, make a quick move for the front seat. If you are fumbling around in the dark for the seatbelt, don't bother. There isn't one. It is with some trepidation that

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you must then prepare yourself for the drivers' death race to the airport.

With one hand on the horn and the other at three o'clock on the steering wheel, so that he could swerve violently to the left or right with the minimum of effort and control, our car broadsided out of the Jin Jiang hotel car park, scattering early morning road sweepers in its wake.

Grey clad cyclists on lightless black bicycles appeared from nowhere out of the grey background mist. We swerved to the left to avoid a certain collision, to find ourselves head on with an approaching car; we swerved to the right to find a man with half a pig on the back of his bicycle staring aghast at us just a few feet in front of the windscreen; an oncoming truck swerved to the right, we swerved to the left onto the hard shoulder, the man with the half pig vanished behind us in the mist, a motor bike without lights appeared coming straight at us on the wrong side of the road . . . and so it continued until we reached the safety of the airport. The usual time for the airport run is 35 minutes but if you have one of the death-race team you can make it in as little as 16.

Once at the airport you are faced with the crush of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of passengers cramped together in a small room, all shouting at the tops of their voices, waving yesterday's boarding passes and ticket stubs at whoever they can. As there is practically permanent fog over Chengdu, flights can be delayed for days – with the consequence that if your flight actually does leave, you often find that it is packed with the passengers of the previous few days and you are left standing there to try again tomorrow.

The only calm that can be seen at the airport is in the

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airport staff who happily sit in their uniforms behind their desks, reading newspapers and drinking from their jam-jars of tea apparently oblivious to the screaming and chaos all around them.

It is here that you learn your first few words of Chinese. No such thing as *manana* exists in the vocabulary of these people. Here it is simple *may-oh* which means *no*. It is a wonderful word which occurs with increasing regularity with the more questions you ask. It means that there are none of what you are asking for, there never have been any, there never will be any and why did you bother to ask?

Which brings us to the second word encountered: *putchidao*. This means *don't know*. So after you have received the first negative answer *may-oh* and you politely enquire where you may find a better answer to your question you will then be told *putchidao*.

It is very important not to lose your temper at this stage. I have often laughed at other foreign passengers hopping up and down from one foot to another, slamming the counter with their fists, doing facial impressions of beetroots as they contort themselves in rage. Of course it is a completely worthless exercise as the result is still a calm *may-oh* from the airline staff.

I have to admit that I once sunk to these levels and even now it embarrasses me to think that I forgot the system and joined the ranks of the ignorant foreigners who push their blood pressures to the limits.

I was coming back in after a long break. Ccccrrrrrrrrrggggggkkkkhhhhpt all around me at the airport, people pushing and shoving with their days old boarding