

True Tales of a Traveller Series

The Way of the Shoestring

# Outdoor Photographer



By Alix Lee



# **The Way of the Shoestring Outdoor Photographer**

*A True Tale of a Traveller, set mostly in Hong Kong and the Isle of Man in the  
1990s and early 2000s*

1<sup>st</sup> Edition

by  
Alix Lee

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Cover Design by Alix Lee.

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*"None of us are here forever,  
including kings and queens"*

## Preface

This story has a little bit of many things in it: travel and the outdoor life, geography and history, ethnic conflict, racism and international relations, political power, family hopes and expectations, psychology and mental health; it even has a ghost story - or perhaps two - hidden away within it.

But more than anything else, it's a story about photography and what the title implies: the way of the shoestring outdoor photographer.

What it doesn't have is detailed information on the low-budget photographic hardware that a shoestring outdoor photographer may need for his or her hobby or way of life; this is not a technical treatise but rather a first-hand account of the experiences of one particular shoestring outdoor photographer: me. It also does not offer guide book-type information on the locations where the story takes place, although like all the accounts in the True Tales of a Traveller series, it does provide sufficiently detailed information on the places concerned for the stories to not only make sense but also to be appreciated, enjoyed, and perhaps even re-read by those readers wishing to deepen their understanding of a particular place. Some of this location-specific information is peculiar to the time the events related took place, but most remains relevant at the time of publication.

The story takes place in the 1990s and early 2000s, mostly in two very different autonomous regions; Hong Kong and the Isle of Man. At the time of publication, I can't assign a number to the story within the True Tales of a Traveller series as I am unsure how many stories remain to be told between it and Volume 4 of the series, but the story will eventually take a definite place in the series, and appear in the paperback series. At well over 50,000 words, the story is also a little longer than a typical novella (though shorter than a typical full-length paperback novel), so I am publishing it not only as an e-book but also as a slim volume paperback. It would be a shame not to.

# True Tales of a Traveller: The Way of the Shoestring Outdoor Photographer

## Chapter One: Life-changing Decisions

### Can a Camera Change Your Life?

That was an interesting question, and one that I recalled having seen being asked in some photography publication or other, in a review of a top-of-the-line professional model.

It was also a question I felt certain I knew the answer to, based on my own direct experience. At least as far as I was concerned. And the camera that had changed my life was not even in the same league as the one I seen the review of. As I finished loading my Minolta Maxxum 7000 with a 36 exposure roll of 200 ISO colour film, I leaned back, rested my right arm on the top of the cold wooden bench, and cradled the camera in my left hand, looking down at it. I had a long day ahead of me and it was still barely light enough for me to see the camera, let alone the trail I intended to hike, so I decided to sip the first cup of coffee from my flask there and then.

'There' was Port St. Mary, a small town at the southern end of the Isle of Man, and 'then' was late summer, 2002. The bench I was sitting on was located on the sea-facing pavement of the aptly-named Bay View Road, which, slightly elevated, overlooked the sandy beach of Chapel Bay. Port St. Mary was home to about 2,000 people at the time, but to anyone able to discern me in the dim light of pre-dawn, they may well have thought I was the only inhabitant.

Only a few minutes previously, my mother had driven away in her Daewoo, back in the direction of the family home in nearby Port Erin, having dropped me off at this spot. I didn't like to bother her to drive me to Port St. Mary, especially so early in the morning, but I wasn't licensed to drive in the Isle of Man, and there was no other way for a shoestring traveller like myself to get where I was so early apart from walking. That walk would have added perhaps 40 minutes to my planned hike for that day, which, if I completed it, would already be an epic, and one of the longest one-day hikes I had ever taken at about 47 kilometres. So I didn't want to add to it a 40-minute walk in the wrong direction.

The hike would take me around the southern tip of the Isle of Man and much of the way up the west coast, from Port St. Mary, to another similarly-sized little town called Kirk Michael. I would, once I had finished sipping my coffee, walk down a path sided by gardens to the shore, passed the harbour where my father's catamaran - the 'Manx Cat' - had once been moored, and then I would continue south along the coast in the direction of The Sound - the southernmost point of the island - following a coastal footpath known in Manx as the Raad Ny Foillan, or the Way of the Gull. The total length of this trail around the island is just over 160 kilometres.

I checked that I had both my lunch box for lunch, and the apple which would serve as my breakfast somewhere along the way to The Sound. And then I finally answered the question that had now been in my mind for several minutes: "Well, you certainly changed *my* life", I muttered to the camera. Then, rolling the SLR over until its lens was pointing at me, I added the question: "Didn't you?"

With no-one else around, I wasn't really concerned that onlookers may have regarded me as a madman for talking to my camera. Even with a clear sky which I could see would lighten rapidly as morning approached, there was still nobody about at this hour, save for a solitary seagull that was perched on a stone wall just a few paces from me in precisely the direction I planned to hike. I chuckled to myself at the coincidence, then

continued my conversation with the camera: "That was a good few years ago now, wasn't it? Back in 1993, as I remember..."

## Too Hot in the Melting Pot

As for the place where my life had undergone this camera-induced change, that had been a small village in the northern New Territories of Hong Kong, not far from the border with the Peoples' Republic of China, although I would never have really been able to appreciate the proximity to the border without the help of my new camera. Yuen Leng Village was a predominantly Hakka village located a few kilometres north of Tai Po's main urban concentration. Tai Po was the largest of the Hong Kong's satellite towns in the northern New Territories.

The Hakka (literally 'Guest People', and actually pronounced 'Hagar' in Cantonese) are a Chinese ethnic group thought to have originated from relatively northern Chinese provinces and moved south in a series of migrations. Apart from the south China coastal regions, particularly Hong Kong, substantial numbers migrated to Taiwan and all parts of south-east Asia. The largest population - around four million - live in Taiwan, and I had known many Hakkansese during my years there, and found them to be, if anything, more friendly and hospitable than the average Taiwan citizen.

I had moved from Hong Kong Island, the urban heart of the British-administered territory, out of a desire to live in something larger than a shoe box, but without paying almost everything I earned for it, and I had not been disappointed. The rent I paid for my house - an actual, detached construction dating back to imperial times - was precisely the same as that which I had paid to live in a single room in Hong Kong Island's North Point district; a room little wider and barely any longer than the bunk bed it housed. There, I slept on the lower bunk but I needed the space provided by the upper bunk bed just to put my meagre belongings on; if I had put them on the floor I wouldn't even have been able to move at all in my room!

However, even in such a small and densely populated territory as Hong Kong, there were considerable differences in the culture and lifestyle of the inhabitants of places like Yuen Leng Village from those of people living in the urban heart of the territory.

In fact, even in the urban heart of Hong Kong, there were also considerable cultural differences to be found between the various districts and neighbourhoods. For example, probably about half of the residents of North Point's Metropole Building, where I lived, were first generation mainland Chinese immigrants, the majority being from Fujian Province, including my middle-aged flatmate, Mr. Sung, as well as Dahai, who at 28 was a young man much closer to my own age. The lingua franca for these people and those in the neighbourhood with whom they interacted was Mandarin, not Cantonese, although Fujianese (also called Hokkien, or southern Min) was also a dialect often heard.

This area was a melting pot for PRC immigrants, who, given time, either integrated and took up permanent Hong Kong residency and - still of necessity in the 1990s - learnt to communicate fluently in Cantonese, however undesirable, or else remained in North Point as mainland immigrants, permanently on the edges of Hong Kong's majority Cantonese-speaking society. All points west of North Point on Hong Kong Island - Wanchai, Causeway Bay, and Central - were phenomenally expensive, as were the residential districts on the hillsides above them, and there was no way a hard-working, Mandarin-speaking mainland immigrant could break into this urban core of the territory without also becoming a Hongkonger to a great extent.

Mr. Sung's wife was an ethnic Chinese of Fujian descent from Indonesia. Mr. Sung himself had travelled to a number of countries in his youth, and had previously visited Taiwan on business several times. But his daughter, who had grown up in this mainland Chinese melting pot, now lived mostly outside it, and was engaged to marry a local Cantonese man. "He's a nice enough fellow", Mr. Sung lamented to me at one time, "but I worry about the cultural differences. I mean, it's bad enough already for my daughter; but what about her children? I think they'll just be the same as other Hong Kong Cantonese children; they'll lose their culture completely."

## This is *My* Territory

It may seem surprising to outsiders that there were even *any* perceivable cultural differences to be found



between Fujianese mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Cantonese. After all, they're all Chinese, aren't they?

But, due to the territory's complex colonial history, and the then vast differences in the territory's way of life from that of the Peoples' Republic of China, there were many more intricate and complex cultural differences to be found.

For example, in late 1992 I had three English language home study students whom I taught at the apartment of one of them, located in Wanchai (just a few kilometres east of Central, the steel and glass financial centre), three evenings a week. These three office girls were all Hong Kong Island born and bred, although their proficiency in English was below the standard for Hong Kong Island, hence the need for lessons. Hong Kong Island was the first Hong Kong region to become a British territory and had long been a favoured location of residence for the British ruling elite, particularly the super-expensive Mid-Levels, part way up the northern side of Victoria Peak which lies directly south of Central, and the astronomically expensive Peak district above that. The Peak district, which meant all the island's land at an elevation of 400 meters or above, provided a climate a few degrees cooler than sea level, with stronger breezes, and a magnificent view of surrounding islands, urban Kowloon to the north, and the New Territories beyond that. As well as, of course, relative peace and quiet and respite from the hubbub of the thriving city below, a prerequisite for well-heeled colonials.

After about six months, the girls' classes came to an abrupt end when the landlord of the Wanchai apartment our classes were held at insisted on tripling the rent. The girl whose family rented the apartment bemoaned the fact that after nearly three decades the family was being forced to re-locate and could not find anywhere affordable to live on the whole of Hong Kong Island. They would be forced to move north "across the sea" (actually only an 8-minute ferry ride!) to the Kowloon peninsula, something neither the girl nor her parents were looking forward to. "Kowloon people are more like mainlanders", this student told me with evident sadness in her voice. "They're not like real Hongkongers!" Her companion students nodded in agreement and sympathy (they lived in Aberdeen, on the island's south side, at residences still within their means).

There was some basis for this girl's point of view. The majority of the territory's shantytowns set up by mainland Chinese refugees during and after the Chinese Civil War were on the Kowloon peninsula. On Hong Kong Island itself, North Point was the only mainland Chinese melting pot (or perhaps ghetto); 'across the sea' there were a number of them.

But without a doubt, the biggest regional differences in Hong Kong were to be found between the urban core which consisted of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, and the semi-rural New Territories which lay mostly to the north, between urban Hong Kong and the Peoples' Republic of China.

Though Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain in perpetuity in 1842 and Kowloon in 1860, the New Territories were only *leased* from imperial China by Britain in 1898 for 99 years by the Second Convention of Peking, and this was the basis for the entire territory being 'returned' to Chinese rule in 1997.

The New Territories were always looked upon by Hong Kong's British colonial rulers as something separate from urban Hong Kong, particularly before the territory's economic boom years began in the late 1960s. In the early years of British administration of the New Territories until well after WWII, upon successfully crossing the border (no mean feat, of course) all a mainland Chinese refugee (as all mainland Chinese immigrants were considered in those days) had to do was to run the gauntlet of British soldiers, police and border guards, and make it to Kowloon to earn the right to remain. If they were caught in the New Territories, they could actually be sent back to China.

The New Territories comprises over 85% of Hong Kong's entire territory, but was home to just less than half of the population of Hong Kong in the early 1990s. Historically, it is the region described in the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory, the lease agreement between Britain and imperial China. Apart from a large peninsula-like chunk of land to the north of Kowloon, it also includes over 200 outlying islands to the north, south, east and west of urban Hong Kong.

When the New Territories was leased from Ching (also written 'Qing') dynasty imperial China, clannish - literally - inhabitants of the New Territories demanded that they retain the laws and customs of the Manchurian-Chinese Empire to which they had previously belonged, and Britain, to its shame, quietly agreed, although not to all of those laws.

By the time I moved to the New Territories, many of these antiquated laws had been amended over the decades as the New Territories was gradually integrated into the territory as a whole. But some remnants of the imperial era remained. For example, believe it or not, in 1993, indigenous New Territories women were not allowed to vote, and were not allowed to inherit property.

And now, upon learning that Hong Kong's new governor, Chris Patten, had plans to abolish these laws and bring the indigenous New Territories inhabitants fully into the 20th century before the century's end, Communist Chinese agitators were active in the New Territories, reinforcing resistance to change. This added another element of anti-foreignism to the already cliquish and insular mentality of the inhabitants of rural New Territories villages like Yuen Leng Village.

## Space to Dream

As a space seeker from the urban heart of Hong Kong, I was following a tradition already several decades old.

After Kowloon almost collapsed under the weight of refugee shantytowns in the 1950s, the British colonial government began looking for ways to alleviate the population pressure on urban Hong Kong.

This was eventually achieved through the development of satellite towns in the New Territories called 'New Towns'. Tsuen Wan, located in the south-west of the New Territories, right on the boundary with Kowloon, was the first of these. Others, such as Tuen Mun, Shatin, and Tai Po followed. These New Towns were intended to be self-reliant, each having not only residential areas but also commercial, industrial and recreational areas, so that their residents would not need to travel to the urban heart of Hong Kong for work or leisure. In this respect, they were only partially successful.

But they did (and do) feature their own shopping malls, libraries, cinemas, government offices, bus terminals, and so on, and a large proportion of the population of most of these satellite towns did and do remain away from the urban heart of the territory most of the time.

In addition to the government-planned high-rise residential areas of Tai Po New Town (in the North District of New Territories East), there were also private estates of detached and semi-detached residences, including one called Hong Lok Yuen only a couple of kilometres south of Yuen Leng Village (and a few kilometres north of Tai Po New Town itself), which catered to some of the more upwardly mobile of the urban Hong Kong overspill. Places like this also created a blending, superficially at least, between the high-rise New Town of Tai Po and the semi-rural villages around it.

And they probably also added to my inability to distinguish between those New Territories inhabitants who had migrated to the New Territories sometime in the last two or three decades, and the indigenous inhabitants. It wasn't until I had actually moved to the New Territories that I came to appreciate these differences.

When I first viewed the ramshackle half-wooden, half-concrete construction that was to become my home, accompanied by the landlord's sister, who lived in a neighbouring village, I was inwardly thrilled. Images of my soon-to-be-realised new lifestyle flashed into my mind. The large main room was something halfway between a courtyard and a living room, with its bare concrete floor, two easy chairs, and an office desk and chair for study. A small cubicle-type room with a shower and toilet had been built into one corner of the room. At the inner end of the large main room was a bedroom, with a wooden partition wall separating it from the main room and a wire net window on the door to keep insects out, while letting air circulate. It was evident at a glance that it would be impossible to keep the main room/ courtyard completely insect free.

But the most unique aspect of this little building almost escaped my attention at first: this was a one-and-a-half storey house. The landlord's sister pointed out the wooden stairs in one corner of the room, leading to a pseudo second floor, which was really just a wooden floor hugging the four sides of the main room, and leaving an open space in the centre. I climbed half way up the stairs to take a look, and I was won over. This 'upper floor' was barely head high, yet it was just high enough to walk around on, and there were two low windows at the front of the building. I could easily imagine myself sitting cross-legged by the side of those windows on my free days, studying at a low table I had yet to buy, a pot of freshly brewed Chinese tea by my side.

The office desk in the main courtyard-living room below, by contrast, was more suitable for work. I was planning to buy a computer, and this would be where I would do translation work in future, as well as learn all about computers and computing. The concrete-floored room was also large enough for martial arts workouts, although there was also a small outdoor courtyard at the front of the house for that, weather permitting. The place seemed perfect, and I was glad to put down a two month deposit and also pay my first month's rent right there and then.

On the office desk, the landlord's sister and I both signed and stamped copies of the lease contract, and then she told me I could move in as soon as I liked. The atmosphere was also very genial on account of the fact that she was able to communicate in Mandarin, which was much easier for me than Cantonese. But after having signed the contract, we both stood back for a moment, me looking at her and expecting her to give me the key; her looking at me, arms crossed, with an inquisitive look.

"I do need tea money, you know? I mean, this isn't *my* place; it's my brother's."

I had never heard the term 'tea money' before, but realised immediately that she meant baksheesh. Being that I was using her work time, that seemed perfectly reasonable, and I brought the last two notes of significant value I had from my wallet; a 1,000 Hong Kong dollar and a 500 Hong Kong dollar note, momentarily unsure how much I should offer. She deftly slipped the 500 Hong Kong dollar note from my fingers and into her waist bag, clasped my hands on the remaining 1,000 dollar note as if she were giving it to me as a gift, and told me with a smile, "this will be enough".

I walked back with the landlord's sister through the village to the main north-south road (the Fanling Highway) between Tai Po and the China border (to the north), which was also the road I would travel on back to Tai Po and then urban Hong Kong (to the south). The landlord's sister ran a general goods shop in her own village, on the opposite side of this road.

My new house could only be reached on foot, but the five-to-ten-minute walk to the main road was not an unpleasant one. The concrete footpath that ran through the village was flanked on both sides much of the way by well-tended agricultural smallholdings and the houses they belonged to. Some older women in the village still wore traditional dress. Traditional dress was characterised by long-sleeved patterned garments, trousers, and a large broad-rimmed hat with a ring of cloth attached to the rim, which provided a sun shield. The pants were usually darker than the patterned tops, but taken as a whole the dress was very dark and drab when seen from a distance. One woman of only about 50, dressed in such a way, who was tending crops outside her house, said something in greeting to the landlord's sister as we passed and the landlord's sister replied with a laugh and a gesture in my direction. Although the Hakka dialect, in southern China at least, is considered very close to Cantonese, I didn't understand the remarks. But the amiable tone of voice was easy enough to pick up. I felt very lucky to have hit upon this opportunity to become a part of a local community far from the urban neighbourhoods favoured by Hong Kong's European expatriates, or even the mainland Chinese immigrant neighbourhoods like the one I was moving from.

But when I actually came to move in, things were a little different.

## The Barbarian Interloper

The events that led to a change in my sentiment towards my neighbours began about 20 minutes after I moved into my new house.

I had been re-arranging the furniture in the main room of my new house, and was on my knees trying to position the office desk so that all four legs made contact with the ground by slipping a piece of cardboard under one of the desk's rear legs, when I thought I heard someone, somewhere nearby, make a comment, apparently under his breath.

I was still wondering if that person had been one of my neighbours outside, and how the comment had come to sound whispered, when I suddenly felt somebody's knee lock firmly onto the calf of my left leg, pressing my leg to the ground. My head hit the underside of the desk as I reared up in shock!

"Come out from there!" I heard a voice, right behind me command in English.

Before I could respond, either physically or verbally, I felt the owner of the voice pulling me from under the desk by the legs. I naturally had no idea who this person could be, but was far from pleased and kicked the person's hands away by the time I was completely out from under the desk. I then jumped to my feet, and turned to see three hostile-looking casually dressed local men, apparently several years older than me, standing just a few paces from me. They included the one who had just pulled me from under the desk, who now had his gaze fixed upon me, and seemed to be just as angry for being kicked away as I was angry for being pulled from under the desk.

"What are you looking for?" he barked at me in Cantonese.

"I'm not looking for anything!" I answered. "And who are you?" None of them offered an explanation. All three men seemed ready to pounce on me at any moment.

I was about to add that this was my house, when another of the three, a little younger than the first, took a pace forward and demanded to know, in very commanding terms, how I had got into the house.

"This is *my* house!" I retorted, before repeating: "Who are *you*?"

"Oh no it's not your house!" this youngest member of the three snapped back. "This house belongs to a man surnamed Wong!"

Upon saying this, he looked towards his companions for support, and the third man, a little older than the other two and more thickset, who was standing furthest away from me, added Mr. Wong's personal name. I suddenly realised that person had to be my landlord, and confirmed that the property was indeed Mr. Wong's, but that I was renting it from him.

There was a delayed reaction of a few moments as the three men seemed to come to the realisation that I was telling the truth. Then, there was an evident ripple of relaxation, and the tension seemed to dissipate somewhat. At least to the point that I didn't feel threatened with imminent attack. I also relaxed slightly. The third man, shorter, stockier, and with something of a more experienced air about him than his companions, stepped forward and showed me his identification: "We're police officers. Can you show me any, er, proof that you rent this house from Mr. Wong?"

I quickly produced the contract I had signed a few days previously from my daypack, but unable to describe it in Cantonese, I switched to Mandarin as I showed it to this man. The response was some flattering compliments from all three as they realised that my Mandarin was better than theirs, and modestly admitted as much. About 10 or 15 minutes of much more friendly and relaxed chat followed, mostly about how I had come to learn Chinese and move to Taiwan, and then Hong Kong. It was a very friendly and relaxed conversation.

By the time these three plainclothes police officers came to leave, I was almost hoping I would see them again sometime soon, although I never did. It was only when they were actually about to walk away from the front door that I thought to ask how they had come to believe I was breaking in to the house in the first place? I knew there had been nothing surreptitious in my actions when I came to enter the house. I had simply walked right up to the front door, produced the key I had been given, and opened the door.

"Oh! We had a phone call", the oldest of the three replied. "One of your neighbours called us to say that she had seen a Barbarian Devil breaking into Mr. Wong's house!"

It was only after he said this that he seemed to realise the implicit insult in this term. With a smile, a chuckle and shrug, he added: "I suppose you know who she meant by that!"

## Ignore Thy Neighbour

Those three police officers apparently belonged to the Cantonese-speaking majority of the territory's population, and their station was, I assumed, somewhere on the peripheries of this Hakka village, perhaps in the landlord's

sister's village but I never found out where. My immediate neighbours were all native Hakka speakers. However, they could, and did, communicate regularly with people from outside the village in Cantonese. But not with me.

At first, I gave very little thought to this. I was working teaching English on Hong Kong Island, and rarely had any opportunity to interact with my neighbours beyond a morning greeting. However, it didn't take me long to notice that not once was any one of my greetings ever returned.

The inhabitants of Yuen Leng Village turned out to be the least friendly people - bar none - I had ever encountered, anywhere, in my life.

Some clarification is needed here: these people were not hostile. They were not like the Christian-hating or Westerner-hating Islamic fundamentalists I had encountered on my travels in places like Pakistan, and indeed would probably have been just as unfriendly to such people as they were to me. They simply wanted nothing to do with people from outside the village, probably even including non-Hakka Chinese, but certainly least of all 'Barbarian Devils' like me.

Some scholars have postulated the notion that the indigenous people of Hong Kong's New Territories during British administration were 'more Chinese than the Chinese'. But what was meant by this was that these indigenous inhabitants were allowed to retain Ching dynasty laws and customs, while the Peoples' Republic to the north, was - theoretically at least - guided by the ideals of communism, a foreign ideology directly imported from the Soviet Union in the early years of conflict with Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China. Chiang Kai-shek, who was heavily dependent on American support, inherited Sun Yet-sen's revolutionary ideals, which were adamantly opposed to imperial China. To the south of the New Territories, in colonial Hong Kong's halls of power, fluency in English was taken for granted, and a Western-educated minority held sway. (At the time, a newspaper report I had seen on proficiency in English estimated that 17% of the territory's population were fluent in English, down significantly from pre-Tiananmen Massacre days due to emigration). Yet, the indigenous New Territories inhabitants were only gently ushered into Hong Kong as a whole over a period of decades, rather than being forced to integrate.

One of the reasons the British colonial government of Hong Kong decided to adopt this softly-softly approach with the New Territories was because the indigenous inhabitants were felt to be intrinsically different from those of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon.

The peninsula-like chunk of land which came to be known as the 'New Territories' has a longer history than the 'barren island' of Hong Kong itself, which was indeed a rather insignificant piece of rock at the time of its cession. It doesn't even figure in the gazetteer of the official map of San On County, to which the island belonged at the time. One reason for this was probably that very few Han Chinese lived there; most of the 'inhabitants' of Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula were Tanka ('Dangar' in Cantonese), a boat-people tribe, who would not be completely assimilated until the 21st century. During imperial rule, the Tanka were not permitted to intermarry with Han Chinese, nor to live on the land, thus it is unlikely they felt strongly either way about the island's cession. The English name Hong Kong (or Hongkong) is probably derived from the Tanka pronunciation of the Cantonese name, Hearngong (the Mandarin, Xianggang, only became popular with the approach of 1997). Hong Kong was certainly Chinese territory, but was not regarded in the same terms as China's Central Plains, the region from which the Han Chinese originate. Rather, it was frontier territory, like most of the south China coast, and especially the south-west coastal regions. In these territories, Han Chinese communities and 'barbarian' ethnic groups lived side by side, sometimes in conflict, usually fairly peacefully.

After the cession, urban Hong Kong prospered and its Chinese population grew rapidly, fueled by a constant influx of refugees. Whether those refugees were escaping imperial Chinese rule, Nationalist Chinese rule, or Communist Chinese rule, they were invariably people ready to make a new start in life and willing to make cultural compromises to achieve what they wanted in life.

In the New Territories, however, things were a little different. There were already some long-settled Han Chinese communities there when Britain took control of the region. The fiercely insular clans that made up the population of the New Territories could not be pushed to integrate for fear of violent backlash. Fortunately for the succession of British governors and other high-ranking British colonial officials serving in the territory, as well as the Colonial Office diplomats with responsibilities towards the territory, very little was understood of all this back in the home country, and most British officials were able to serve out comfortable sinecures in the colony just by being careful not to rock any boats.

## The 'Ghost Man' of Yuen Leng

For all Hong Kong Chinese in the 1980s and 1990s, including the most Westernised of the Cantonese majority on Hong Kong Island, the generally accepted term in spoken Cantonese for a white (a Caucasian) was '*gweilo*', which is usually translated as 'ghost fellow' ('gwei' is ghost, 'lo' is fellow). This is a little misleading, because it does not equate to the European concept of a ghost.

In Chinese folk tradition, spirits generally fall into two groups; good and bad. Good spirits are termed '*shen*' (gods), and China itself is sometimes called '*Shenjiou Da Di*'; literally 'Land of the Gods'. So, there is no confusion between gods and ghosts. Ghosts are evil or horrifying spirits, and this is what white Europeans were thought to resemble. From Mandarin, the term is sometimes more accurately translated as 'demon' or 'devil', as in the term 'foreign devil' (*yang gwei*; actually meaning Western devil).

In order not to rock the boat, the European (principally British) community in Hong Kong generally accepted Cantonese insults like *gweilo*, often using them to refer to themselves. After all, they also used insulting terms to refer to the 'yellow devils', the 'yellow peril', the 'little people', the 'chinks', the 'slant-eyes', and so on and so forth.

Hong Kong's Cantonese majority, for their part, had (and have) an extensive lexicon of derogatory terms for just about every kind of person one could possibly encounter in the territory, apart from, of course, themselves. Naturally, this included (and includes) not only terms like 'black devils' (*hak gwei*) for anybody with dark skin, but also various insults for Indians, Filipinos, Vietnamese and other minorities present in large numbers in the territory. While the governments of other countries and regions tackled overtly racist terms in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, and introduced laws against using them in public, in the 1990s you could still find all these racist Cantonese terms used in every kind of publication, including even newspapers.

*Faanlo* (barbarian fellow), *faangwei* (barbarian devil/demon/ghost), or *faangweilo* (barbarian devil-fellow) are terms generally considered a notch or two more insulting than simply *gweilo*; and these terms, though not of Hakka origin, were the ones I heard most often in reference to myself while in Yuen Leng Village.

When I lived in Yuen Leng Village, more than 90 years since the New Territories' lease to Britain took effect, as far as the villagers were concerned, I was indeed something like a ghost; something which existed on another plane from themselves.

Sometimes, some of the villagers could see the horrifying big nosed, wide-eyed, pale-faced apparition. However, they knew the dangers of recognising the existence of the world of ghosts - they could easily be pulled into my ghostly world - so they studiously ignored me. In the several years I lived there, no more than a dozen sentences were spoken to me by any of the adults of that village.

How come those villagers did speak to me this dozen or so times then? Mostly this happened by accident. The best example I can think of this was that of my closest neighbour, who lived on the other side of the concrete path which ran in front of my house (the houses to either side of mine were unoccupied; one was only a ruin). This short and muscular man, in his late twenties or early thirties, lived with his ageing parents. I noticed that he often wore a smile and was prone to chat at length with his neighbours (apart from me, of course). Being that our houses were so close, our paths had crossed many times, and I had greeted him out of habit for the first half dozen or so times I saw him, before deciding it wasn't worth the effort. I subsequently adopted his unsmiling manner as we passed on the concrete path, not recognising his existence any more than if we were passing strangers on a zebra crossing in Hong Kong's busy Central district.

But during the 1993 Lunar New Year, while celebrations were going on in the village, I happened to return to my house through the midst of these celebrations. I didn't celebrate the Lunar New Year myself, and worked almost throughout the official holidays as my students were nearly all Koreans and they took only one day off for this holiday. (At that time, I was working as an English language home tutor for Korean and Japanese families resident in the territory). My path crossed with that of my neighbour, and on the spur of the moment I wished him a happy new year. Unthinkingly he returned the greeting. It could hardly have happened under any other circumstances, which was precisely why I tried my luck.

Though I didn't celebrate the Lunar New Year, I was in a good mood that night, and had to open a bottle of wine in celebration! I had taken the fellow by surprise; his guard was down, and he himself was obviously slightly inebriated. Without thinking, he had returned my greeting. I felt I had scored a major victory over my neighbours' determined unfriendliness!

However, that only happened once. By complete chance, the following New Year, 1994, after a full year in which not a single sentence had passed between us, I returned to my house, passing my neighbour and a throng of villagers who had gathered to see a 'lion dance' which was being held there. I stopped to look on, and when the dance was finished continued on my way. I noticed my neighbour at the side of the concrete path, talking with several of his friends from outside the immediate neighbourhood, and they also noticed me and remarked on the 'Ghost-fellow' among them. But when I wished the man a happy new year, he quickly turned away, pretending not to have seen or heard me!

To live in such circumstances would probably have sent some people into depression, and many would not bother staying in the village any longer, which I was sure was what many of my neighbours hoped would be the case for me too. Such a depression did strike me too, but its effects were delayed by many months.

### Please Come In - No Passport Required

The vast majority of my English students lived in Taikoo Shing, a large, high-rise residential community located in Quarry Bay, towards the eastern end of Hong Kong Island's urban concentration.

The estate is integrated with the adjacent Cityplaza retail and office complex, which provides for many of the residents' daily needs. For whatever reason (there didn't seem to be any obvious one), this large and rather impersonal-looking high-rise estate had become a kind of 'Little Korea', or 'Koreatown' (and Japantown).

Before the construction of this estate, there was already a well-established 'Little Korea' over the water in Kowloon. Also known as Korea Street, this Little Korea was (and is) centered on Kimberley Street in the tourist heartland of Tsimshatsui. This neighbourhood rightly earned the term due to being home to many ethnic Koreans, but most of these Koreans were permanent or long-term residents of the territory who had been in Hong Kong since at least the 1960s, whereas most of those in Taikoo Shing were 'expats', working in the territory for just a few years. To provide education to the children of these Korean expats, the Korean International School of Hong Kong was established nearby the estate in 1994.

All but two of my students (who were Japanese) were from South Korea. Typically, I taught housewives during the afternoons, children as soon as they finished school, and fathers when they arrived home from work, although in some cases the mothers and/or children would also take part in the father's classes, or at least sit by and listen. There was a tremendous interest in learning English among each and every family I taught; they needed English on a daily basis for just about every aspect of their lives in Hong Kong. English was the first official language, and as these temporary residents typically only stayed in Hong Kong for a couple of years, few bothered learning Mandarin, and only one of my students bothered learning Cantonese, the primary dialect of Hong Kong (it was generally felt that this dialect didn't have much value internationally, whereas English could also prove useful after leaving Hong Kong).

Although, like myself, these families would only reside in this British-administered territory for a few years, they were as hospitable towards me as if they were back home in Korea, if not more so. This brought to my mind the concept of an embassy being a piece of that country's territory located in a foreign land. I often felt that entering these apartments was like leaving the Cantonese Chinese culture of Hong Kong, and walking into a home in South Korea.

There were a number of ways this manifested itself. Apart from the most obvious one, that Korean was the language spoken by the families among themselves, most of these families preferred Korean-style cuisine while at home. That would not seem to be something which would affect me in any way, but in fact I was often invited to eat with the family at the end of a class, and even though I generally declined meals, there was almost always a supply of Korean-style snacks placed on the table at which I was teaching. But the most notable difference was the degree of politeness. For example, often when I finished teaching just one family member, and made to leave for my next class, the other family members, who had been occupied with other matters during the class,

would come to the door to see me off! This couldn't have contrasted more with the deliberate refusal to recognise my existence in Yuen Leng Village.

All of this, and of course regular discussion of cultural and lifestyle differences between Korea and Hong Kong, aroused my interest in everything Korean, and I even spent some of my little free time on Sundays learning Korean language from books and audio cassettes. Every simple, bungling sentence I learnt and later unleashed on my students was enthusiastically received. And the English classes I taught for a living, especially the last ones of the day, when my students knew I had no other classes to attend to, were often followed by free, impromptu Korean language classes based on my latest learning attempts.

These free lessons, though not very professional, sometimes left me with a feeling of guilt at charging for the English lessons I taught, and I often had to insist that the time had come for me to leave in order to cut these Korean lessons short. This was not a fiction; it typically took me nearly an hour and a half to commute between Taikoo Shing and Yuen Leng Village.

Apart from eating with them in their homes, several of these families also invited me to meals outside, at restaurants in Taikoo Shing's Citiplaza complex.

It was probably this phenomenal hospitality and friendliness, more than anything else, that saved me from immediately plunging into the bottomless abyss of depression and racial, or ethnic loathing, that gradually came to exert a grip on me after I moved into Yuen Leng Village. Or at least it delayed that fate considerably.

## Don't Talk to the Devil

However, inevitably, I could not avoid or ignore the effects of my neighbours' unfriendliness indefinitely.

Readers may have noticed that I previously mentioned that "no more than a dozen sentences were spoken to me by any of the *adults* of that village" during a period of two years.

Children act more intuitively than adults, and don't usually even begin to learn the prejudices expected of them as adults until they enter adolescence. In this respect, the children of Yuen Leng Village were probably no different from children anywhere else. Kids tend to be kids, no matter where they live.

One sunny Sunday morning, a few weeks into my period of residence in the village, I was having a martial arts workout in the courtyard-living room of my new home, when it struck me that the whole thing would be a lot more enjoyable outside, in the warm, early morning sunshine.

I had hardly begun practising with my nunchaku when I heard a boy of about eight or nine years of age a couple of houses away from mine exclaim excitedly (in Cantonese): "Wow! Bruce Lee!" He then ran away and I heard him shout something or other to some friends of his out of sight, before quickly running back, and over to the side of my house to get a better look.

A few minutes later, five other children from the neighbourhood had joined him. All wanted to practise with the nunchaku, and as these were only 'practise nunchaku' (light, foam-clad versions of the real thing), I let them, teaching them some very basic skills, one by one. Though much time was spent falling about laughing at each others' ineptitude, that didn't do anything to dampen their enthusiasm.

They were even more determined to learn martial arts from me after I demonstrated a few taekwondo kick techniques! Eventually, I thought I would never get rid of them. However, at some point I had to go back into the house to use the toilet. When I came back out a couple of minutes later, all but the first boy, from two houses away, had disappeared. He stood offering me the nunchaku. "Where's everybody gone?" I asked as I took them.

That he didn't tell me, but rather simply said, "thank you, teacher", gave me a bow, then turned and ran away. I didn't see him again for many weeks.

Finally, one Sunday morning, I saw him hanging around in front of his house. I walked a few paces from my own front yard, called to him, and reminded him that he and his friends had said they wanted to learn martial arts



from me.

After glancing around himself, as if to be sure nobody was looking, he ran the couple of dozen paces between us, then informed me in hushed tones that his dad had told him "Don't talk to the Barbarian Devil!". This part was delivered in obvious mimicry of his father, but he added in his own tone of voice: "I want to learn kung-fu!" before running away again. And those were the last words he spoke to me.

## Blood-stained Territories

I had, of course, already become familiar with Chinese racial and ethnic prejudices, such as those levelled against me during my time in Taiwan and in urban Hong Kong, but the circumstances in Yuen Leng Village went far beyond any of that. And though I had been the target of racist insults on many an occasion in Taiwan, I also had no lack of local friends there, including some of Hakka ethnicity. Rather than letting this treatment by the Yuen Leng villagers affect me, I tried to look at things from their point of view, and to this end I read up on the history of the region in the public library at Shatin New Town, a larger new town to the south of Tai Po. It was only then that I realised how much ethnic conflict, discrimination, and distrust was a part of the way of life for the people of Hong Kong's New Territories.

Traditionally, there had never been much love lost between the two main ethnic groups of the region, the Cantonese and Hakka. During the Ching dynasty, present-day Hong Kong was the greater part of the imperial district of San On (or Xin An in Mandarin) and home to around 570 Cantonese and 270 Hakka settlements. The lowland areas of the New Territories were settled by the Cantonese, who generally referred to themselves as 'local people' to distinguish themselves from the Hakka 'guest people'. The Hakka were forced to settle around the Cantonese villages, in the less desirable farming lands bordering on hilly terrain, like Yuen Leng village.

The two groups, basically both just clan alliances (perhaps tribal alliances would be a more accurate term) fought a series of battles between 1855 and 1867 in the Pearl River delta close to Hong Kong, which left approximately a million dead, with the Hakka suffering the greater number of casualties. That's more than the total number of British casualties in WWII, both civilian and military, plus all American WWII casualties *and* Vietnam War casualties combined. Yet I hadn't even *heard* of these wars before I moved to the New Territories.

But conflicts like this were nothing new to the insular Hakka. One of the most characteristic features of Hakka architecture is the fortifications around their villages; many of their earlier settlements (before they reached Hong Kong), were walled, much like European towns and villages in the Dark Ages and into the Middle Ages, when outsiders were generally looked upon with suspicion, fear, and distrust.

Then came the lease of the New Territories to Britain, and the Six-Day War, which was fought between the British and the main Cantonese clans of the New Territories in 1899. This could more accurately be termed the Six-Day Massacre. The British systematically slaughtered around 500 Cantonese irregulars without losing a single British soldier, demonstrating vastly superior military technology and tactics, as well as a determination to crush resistance at the outset. And of course that paved the way for many decades of hatred and resentment towards the territory's colonial overlords.

However, after the slaughter, perhaps feeling sorry for the losers in this unequal battle, the British colonial government of Hong Kong decided to grant the indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories - Cantonese and Hakka alike - the right to retain traditional Ching dynasty laws and customs of land inheritance, land usage and marriage. From the point of view of the indigenous people, this slaughter was thus not regarded as a complete defeat. The whole point of the 'war' from the New Territories' Chinese point of view was to demonstrate their determination to remain different and separate from the more Westernised Chinese living in Kowloon and on Hong Kong Island.

And so I consoled myself that a deep-seated distrust of outsiders was a part of the culture of the indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories, whether Cantonese, Hakka, or even the small number of Tanka boat people who lived on the coastal peripheries. If there was barely any trust and acceptance between the various local ethnic groups, how could I expect there to be any towards a horrific round-eyed, big-nosed ghostly apparition?

## Here Comes the Imperialist!

However, on top of all this very traditional unfriendliness, there was also an overlay of another kind of hostility towards 'foreign devils' in Hong Kong at this time. That was the hostility actively promoted by the Chinese Communist Party and its supporters and collaborators in the territory.

During my first few months in Hong Kong, I gave little thought to this kind of hostility, and disregarded most of the zealots propagating Maoist ideology in the territory as either dimwits or mentally unbalanced.

For example, while living in Hong Kong Island's North Point, I worked out each morning at a large park a few kilometres to the west called Victoria Park, which featured a seated statue of Britain's Queen Victoria close to the main entrance. Every single day I saw a middle-aged man spend at least 30 minutes standing in front of the statue and spitting at it. He always carried a bottle of mineral water to refresh himself, and was often still busy spitting at the statue when I left the park.

On another occasion, while on a subway train, a shirtless man in his 30s walked over to me and began shouting "Long live the Peoples' Republic of China!" repeatedly from a distance of only a couple of feet. I smiled and nodded to demonstrate agreement, but inwardly I was ready for physical assault at any moment. Obviously, such mentally unhinged characters cannot be expected to act like normal people. But from my observations, communist ideology only seemed to attract people like this in the Hong Kong of that era. A very large proportion of the population had migrated to Hong Kong specifically to escape life in communist China.

However, after it became clear that Governor Chris Patten was serious about instituting political reform in Hong Kong, Communist China and its representatives in the territory began turning up the heat, hoping to force a change of course on political reform as they had so many times before, and eventually they seemed to be successful in eliciting the support or at least sympathy of a relatively large proportion of the population, making good use of traditional Chinese racist sentiment and terminology to achieve this end.

Lu Ping, head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office in Beijing, and Patten's opposite number in the PRC, refused to shake hands with the Hong Kong governor when they met and accused Patten of "three great violations: violation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong; violation of Hong Kong's Basic Law; and violation of previous understandings." When Patten asked Lu to be specific about these 'previous understandings' Lu declined to, but simply began referring to Patten as, "the Triple Violator," the "Man of Guilt", or even "the Stinking Prostitute of Colonialism". Lu was regarded as a moderate within the CCP. The local communist press in Hong Kong eagerly latched onto this last term to refer to the territory's most senior representative.

It transpired that the previous understandings Lu Ping had spoken of had been reached with British Foreign Office diplomats and sinologists like Percy Cradock, acting without authorisation from London.

The insular Hakka village of Yuen Leng was relatively unaffected by Chinese Communist Party activists in the area, even though they worked hard to inspire protests against the Patten government's intention of granting New Territories women the right to vote and inherit property. (This was despite the fact that all China had enjoyed universal suffrage for decades and that the Chinese Communists had vehemently fought against and abolished all such vestiges of imperial-era sex inequality early on in its history).

But the peripheries of this Hakka village were mostly Cantonese, and they were certainly more keyed in to the latest political circumstances.

On one occasion, while walking the concrete path through the village, and nearing the main road, where I would take a bus or minibus to Tai Po, I noticed two young men chatting in the yard of one of the village's outermost houses. As I approached, I heard one state in Cantonese: "here comes the British imperialist!"

I had never seen either of these two men before, and had only been living in the village for a few months, yet somehow word had reached them that the Barbarian Devil who had recently moved in was also a 'British Imperialist'!

I had thought of correcting them on this point and asking them where they had got the notion that I was a British

imperialist, but by the time I actually reached that house, the two young Cantonese speakers were nowhere to be seen. After I had passed the house and walked up onto the pedestrian overpass (over the Kowloon-Canton railway line), I heard one shout to me in Cantonese: "1997 will soon be here!"

This was only shouted when I had reached a point that there was no way I could have been expected to walk all the way back to confront the shouter.

## The Downward Slide

Slowly and imperceptibly - even to myself - my initial enthusiasm for living in this village was transformed into a cheerless determination to stay put whether my neighbours found my presence uncomfortable or not. I gradually fell into the habit of ignoring not only my neighbours, as they ignored me, but also any other local people I encountered in Hong Kong. I not only didn't speak to anyone unless I had to; if I was spoken to by anybody, and the question or comment didn't absolutely require a response, I just ignored it completely. Even if it happened to be nothing more than a polite comment made with only the best of intentions.

I came to loathe the majority Cantonese almost as much as I did the Hakka of Yuen Leng Village. After all, as I saw it, it was their social and cultural domination that had made the Hakka of villages like Yuen Leng as insular and unfriendly as they were.

On one or two occasions I had opportunities for revenge. For example, once, while my girlfriend from Taiwan was visiting me, and we were waiting in Tai Po town centre for a bus or minibus that would pass Yuen Leng Village, one of the villagers, a muscular man in late middle-age happened to see us and attempted to engage in conversation with my girlfriend, first in Hakka, then in Cantonese. I had seen this man in the village many times before, but of course, he had never spoken directly to me. He obviously assumed my girlfriend to be one of his own kind, though in fact she didn't speak a word of either dialect. Before my girlfriend could explain that she didn't understand, I stepped in and asked in Mandarin in a very derogatory tone: "Don't you even speak Mandarin? How do you expect anyone to understand you?"

He looked momentarily bewildered and tried again to speak to her in Cantonese, again getting no more than a shrug of incomprehension. I locked eyes with him before he went on his way, and made sure he noticed my look of scorn and disgust.

But incidents like that were hollow victories. I didn't enjoy living in Yuen Leng Village any more on account of them, but less.

Still, I grew increasingly determined that I wasn't leaving, no matter how unfriendly my neighbours were. I felt sure that if I ever came to the point of a physical confrontation with any of my unfriendly neighbours, I could take on any of them. If I ever came to the point of a verbal confrontation, I felt I could hold my own even in Cantonese. And if I ever came to the point of a legal confrontation, I was confident there was nothing illegal I was doing in renting a house from its owner and living in it.

## Comparative Disadvantages

However, one day, while waiting for a bus or minibus from Tai Po to Yuen Leng village at the very same bus stop I had encountered that muscular fellow, I noticed some cameras for sale in a photography equipment and film developing shop near the bus stop. As I looked at these while waiting for the bus to arrive, my mind was taken back several years to the time of my last SLR camera, a Praktica EE2.

Though I had very little interest in what I saw, just as I had very little interest in anything at all outside of my English classes in Taikoo Shing, I still looked at these several SLR cameras and tried to assess them and their worth, in order to kill time as I waited for my bus.

The three cameras were a Canon, a Nikon, and a Minolta. The Canon was the EOS 5 as I remember, and the Nikon may have been the F4E. The Nikon was the most expensive of the three at twice the price of the Minolta, while the Canon was a little less than twice the price but still significantly more expensive. Looking at the

descriptions written by the side of each camera, it seemed clear that the Nikon was indeed a top-of-line model. For example, its range of shutter speeds went beyond anything I could even imagine a use for at both the fast end and the slow.

The Minolta's range of functions seemed to justify its price as by far the cheapest of the three. And yet, it still seemed to be a very sophisticated and powerful model compared to what I could remember of my Praktica EE2. I also remembered how even the range of functions of that camera had kept me busy perusing its manual for days after I bought it in late 1980, shortly before I began travelling, and had to assume that photographic technology had progressed considerably in the 13 years that had since passed. That seemed only logical; in comparison to my first SLR camera, a clunky Soviet-made Zenith-E, the East German Praktica had seemed like a very sophisticated model at the time I bought it, able to provide everything a keen amateur photographer, or even an aspiring professional, could want.

Though without doubt a budget camera, the Praktica EE2 was an exceptional camera for its time, which made me feel glad I had bought it. It featured fully electronic, full aperture TTL (through-the-lens) metering, something no other budget camera of its era could offer. Though I spent a great deal of time making myself familiar with all its features and settings, I still felt I hadn't made full use of all those functions and settings by the time it was stolen from me in 1990.

The Zenith-E (or Zenit-E), though a relatively heavy and cumbersome camera compared to the Praktica, was popular and easy to use; the ideal beginner's camera for someone like myself who would never take any kind of professional instruction. Over 12 million Zenith-Es were produced.

Looking at the three much more modern models in the Tai Po shop window, I was struck by the thought that it was about time I bought a new camera, if I was to stay up to date in photography, but I immediately chastised myself for having such a thought. So what if I didn't stay up to date? Big deal! I would leave 'staying up to date' to the sheep who felt they had to move in step with everyone else.

Even after several years without a camera, I concluded that I had good reasons for not bothering to buy a new camera and no good reasons for buying one. I had no intention of taking up photography again, whether to incorporate it into my travels or otherwise. And in fact, as far as my travels were concerned, they had also reached a nadir, as had my life in general.

The first good reason not to buy a camera was that there were plenty of other things I needed to spend my hard-earned money on. Why waste money on a frivolous toy, just to take some probably none-too-pretty pictures to show myself, I asked inwardly?

The second good reason - so I thought - was that there was nothing to take photos of in Hong Kong anyway, and I had no overseas travel planned. I felt I had already seen all Hong Kong had to offer photographically years ago during my first visits to Hong Kong Island's Victoria Peak, with the famous views of the city seen from that location.

And yet, I couldn't help but notice these three cameras, with their prices and functions individually tagged, and a large piece of cardboard behind the three of them with the words "Rock Bottom Prices" written on it with a marker pen.

And, to kill time, I still tried to assess the value of the three cameras in the window. The Nikon and the Canon seemed to be priced very reasonably if the Minolta was, at pretty hefty prices compared to the Minolta. But, I told myself, they were obviously both professional models, and I couldn't even imagine who in Tai Po would even be able to make full use of all the functionality had to offer. I knew I couldn't, even if I had a sudden windfall and decided to waste it all on a camera.

A few days after seeing these three cameras for sale in Tai Po, I happened to pass a photography shop in an upmarket shopping complex in Admiralty, a metro interchange station on Hong Kong Island where I usually changed MTR trains.

At the time, the 'MTR' (Mass Transit Railway), though it included some light rail in the New Territories, generally referred to the underground railway system of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, and didn't include the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR), which was primarily a single railway line between Hong Kong's Kowloon and Canton

(already better known as Guangzhou even then), located within the PRC at the upper end of the Pearl River delta. It was this rail service that I usually took to and from urban Hong Kong, and the MTR was usually what I took to get around in urban Hong Kong.

In this photography shop in Admiralty, I saw the same model of Canon for sale in the shop window - at an additional 30% on top of the price of the shop in Tai Po!

Even given that the shopping mall was an expensive one throughout, in a location where rents had to be astronomical, this still seemed like a huge difference to me. What would a professional photographer, or even an accomplished amateur, stand to gain by spending an extra 30% just to buy this camera at this location, when he or she could buy the same camera for so much less in Tai Po, I asked myself?

I laughed to myself on the way home as I thought I knew the answer, and it was an obvious one to me at the time: no professional photographer would ever be looking for a camera in a backwater like Tai Po; so the shop there could probably give the camera away and still nobody who could use it would want it. Why would any professional photographer even bother going to a dump like Tai Po in the first place, I asked myself, unless they were lost? I doubted if anybody in the whole of Tai Po even had the intelligence to learn how to use such a sophisticated piece of imaging technology, and I enjoyed smugly turning this thought over in my mind as I changed trains at Kowloon Tong, in the north of Kowloon, from the MTR train to the Kowloon-Canton Railway train which would take me north to Tai Po Market station.

### Hitting 'Rock Bottom'

I would once again have to wait for a bus or minibus at that same bus stop in Tai Po, right in front of the shop where I had seen the Canon, the Nikon and the Minolta. As I couldn't remember the model of the Nikon, I decided to check that, and keep an eye out thereafter, in order to see if a similar price difference existed between Tai Po and Hong Kong Island for that camera make and model too.

But as I walked to the bus stop from the railway station at Tai Po Market, I also had to ask myself what a professional photographer would stand to *lose* by buying the Canon in Tai Po instead of Admiralty, if, for example, they were indeed lost or something, and somehow stumbled upon this shop? The camera shop in Tai Po was certainly a lot less attractive externally than the shop in Admiralty, with an appearance nondescript enough to cause you to miss it completely if you weren't looking for it. Yet there was no reason to believe the place was an untrustworthy fly-by-night. The shop may well have been there for decades.

As I closed in on the camera shop window, my eyes opened wide: the Canon and the Nikon were gone! The 'Rock Bottom Prices' sign had been changed to 'Rock Bottom Price', which was placed directly next to the Minolta. At first I was dumbfounded: apparently, there actually *were* people in a dump like Tai Po who knew how to use such equipment, contrary to my original judgement.

But by the time I reached my house, I thought I knew the reason for the sudden absence of the Canon and the Nikon, and I was once again secure in the knowledge that I had made no mistake in my estimation of whether or not any Tai Po residents could make use of those professional-level cameras.

To my mind, there were only two possibilities: the first and most obvious was that the owner/ manager of the camera shop had deliberately removed the Canon and the Nikon in order to create the false impression that they really had been sold, as a promotional tactic to sell the Minolta. Anybody who had noticed these three cameras and was thinking of buying one may thus be led to believe that these bargain cameras were selling like hot cakes, and that they had better buy the last remaining model while they still had a chance!

That made perfect sense to me. The Hong Kong Chinese were a profit-obsessed people, constantly scheming devious new ways to line their pockets and fill their bank accounts. The Canon and Nikon hadn't been sold at all; the shopkeeper had merely stashed them away somewhere at the back of his shop! I laughed at my realisation, and congratulated myself on coming to it. They may be a devious lot, I told myself, but I was always one step ahead of them, and easily able to see through all their little tricks.

But, just as I was turning in for the night, I suddenly realised that this line of reasoning had a fundamental flaw: if

the boss of the camera shop wanted to push the sale of one camera by removing the other two, it would have made more sense to remove the Minolta - the cheapest of the three - than either the Canon or the Nikon. That could leave one expensive professional-class camera remaining, providing maximum profit, then the same trick could be pulled again with the remaining expensive model.

After turning over - and disregarding - the possibility that the shop owner was just too stupid to realise that, I decided that somebody had indeed bought the two state-of-the-art cameras. But so what? That meant nothing! I knew the Hong Kong Chinese to be a showy lot; always flaunting their wealth and trying to impress, quite unlike mainlanders or Taiwanese. I laughed at the thought of some moneyed Hong Kong Cantonese, perhaps even somebody from the upmarket Hong Lok Yuen estate to the south of Yuen Leng, with not one but two top-of-the-line cameras dangling from his neck, without any idea of how to use either of them!

Finally, almost exhausted at considering all these possibilities, but glad to have hit on the answer, I fell asleep.

Oh, God!

By coincidence – apparently – a number of payments were made to me over the following two days. None of these were windfalls; all were payments for work rendered or shortly to be rendered, yet not all of them were really due.

Before I began teaching these Korean families in Taikoo Shing, I had insisted on taking tuition fees before classes began. If a month of daily tuition was wanted, then it had to be paid for in advance. But after having discovered how dedicated my Korean students were to learning English, I dropped this requirement as I felt it unnecessary. Yet they insisted on continuing to pay me upfront. One family even paid me before returning to Korea for a short holiday for the classes they would take after coming back to Hong Kong, even though I assured them that I could wait until they came back. I also took on two new Saturday classes at the same time, and even though I didn't so much as mention tuition, both groups had already prepared a month's tuition.

In addition, an English teacher by the name of Ralph unexpectedly called me late one evening, wanting to meet me somewhere in Central the next day to pay me back a couple of thousand Hong Kong dollars I had lent him over a year previously. Ralph had been, like myself, a victim of Taiwan's 1992 purge of foreign workers; he arrived in the territory with very little money and home was a bunk bed in Tsimshatsui district's Chungking Mansions backpacker hostel building for at least his first few months in Hong Kong. I passed on a couple of my English classes to him, partly because he needed the work but mostly because I really couldn't handle my own work load, and it was through one of those students that he had obtained my North Point phone number, and through that, my present New Territories phone number. I had long ago written off the money, but Ralph was determined to pay me back. As far as I remembered, I had lent Ralph two thousand Hong Kong dollars, but when he came to pay me back, he insisted that the amount had been 2,500.

The result of all this was that I couldn't use the excuse of having no ready money available to buy the Minolta; I had more than enough, and in fact had plenty to spare.

The following Saturday, this thought impinged again and again on my awareness during my morning's classes. I had passed the camera shop several times over the previous several days, and being keen to get back home and relax had successfully shut this thought from my mind so far. But now it was Saturday afternoon, I had no classes for the rest of the day, and plenty of time to spare. On the train north from Kowloon, I asked myself what I had to lose if I bought the camera? The obvious answer, so it seemed, was my money. What if the thing didn't function properly, or if it did when I bought it, but then went kaputt after only a week or two?

I also thought about all the other things demanding my money, yet it seemed there was nothing urgent enough to prevent me from buying the camera. I still had cash to spare, which was a rare circumstance for me. Finally, I decided to at least have a look at the thing if it was still in the window.

I almost hoped it wasn't, but it was, with the same 'Rock Bottom Price' advertising it. Knowing now about the price differences between this little shop and the one in Admiralty, I suspected this may even have been not a very long way from the truth...

I walked into the shop. A medium-built man in early middle age, dressed in a polo-necked t-shirt, was standing behind the counter, close to the door. He had just made some humorous comment to a woman standing a few paces away, who I took to be his wife, and was still smiling.

I addressed the man in Cantonese: "Boss, that Minolta in the window; does it come with a warranty?" At this stage, this was my main concern – I had already virtually decided to buy the camera, provided that it seemed to be what it was advertised as. But I didn't want this character wriggling out of responsibility if anything went wrong with the thing after I bought it.

"Yes, of course it does; a one year warranty. You shouldn't have any problems with it, but if you do, just bring it back here and we'll send it off to Minolta's Hong Kong branch for repairs for you..."

The man's wife then said something to him in Hakka, and upon hearing the dialect, without conscious volition, I made a clearly audible comment in English: "Oh, God!"

The boss, who had of course heard the comment looked at me with an expression of concern. "Is something wrong?" he asked

"No, no", I replied, quickly trying to cover up my faux pas. "It's just that hearing your wife speaking Hakka reminded me of my Hakka friends in Taiwan."

"Ah, you're from Taiwan! I thought you sounded like a Mandarin speaker. Love Taiwan, been there many times. Hope we can go there again this summer..."

I liked the fact that the man had termed me "from Taiwan", and "a Mandarin speaker", despite my appearance and the fact that Mandarin was obviously not my native language, rather than stressing my foreignness, as was much more usual. This was rare indeed at this time, both in Taiwan and in Hong Kong. I was also interested to hear how he had come to visit Taiwan so many times, and the matter of the camera was put aside for five or ten minutes, while we discussed various locations and circumstances in Taiwan.

This was the first positive interaction I had had with a Hakkinese in Hong Kong. I never got around to asking whether the couple were New Territories natives or not, but in any case, the meeting put me in a very good state of mind for the rest of the day, and made me temporarily much more tolerant of my unfriendly neighbours.

## New Camera, New Perspectives

Back at my house, with the rest of the afternoon and evening free, I sat in the courtyard-living room, trying to get familiar with the functions of my new camera.

The camera I had bought, a Minolta Maxxum 7000, though a low-budget model (what would later, in the digital era, come to be termed an 'entry-level' camera) that had first come onto the market a full nine years earlier, in some respects was ahead of its time. It was the first camera in the world to include both integrated autofocus and motorised film advance, features that would later be adopted by virtually all single lens reflex cameras.

There are never many budget models on the market at any time capable of inspiring dreams of professional-level photography in the user, without the need to 'upgrade' to more sophisticated equipment. But this was one that did that for me, after I saw the results of the first roll of film. Particularly when I used it with the additional 60-180mm zoom lens that I had bought. At the time I bought it, I felt the camera shop owner was taking advantage of our rapport to flog me something I didn't really want or need. But, being in a good mood, I allowed him to talk me into buying the lens, and a cheaper wide angle one, both of which I later discovered to be far superior to the standard factory-issue 50mm lens.

Once sure I knew how to select the settings I wanted, I took a shot of my own open front door, from inside the house.

"Well, that's your first picture of nothing", I told myself. "Maybe I'll need to take another 35 pictures of nothing just to be sure I'm using the thing right!".

At first, making sure I was using the camera right was indeed the only excuse I could find for actually using up precious camera film on taking photos in a place where there was in fact nothing to take photos of, in my opinion. I still couldn't imagine what I could possibly find even in the whole of Hong Kong worth using an entire roll of film on. But I did enjoy using the camera, and after taking that first shot, I decided to take one more, in daylight, outside. I took a photo of the 'house' next door, which was actually no more than a ruin; the roofless remains of the front and rear walls.

Then I had an idea. While checking out the area behind my house shortly after moving in, I had noticed a path leading up the hillside directly behind my house. It seemed like a good idea to get a little way above the village and take an aerial shot of it, with my house somewhere in the foreground.

This I did, and I found the spot to indeed be an excellent location to take a photo of the village. Not only that, but my body seemed to benefit from the short climb up the hillside, and my mind seemed to benefit from being at the new location, overlooking the village.

I took not just one shot but several at this new location, no more than a couple of dozen metres or so higher than the mostly one- or two-storey buildings below me. Then I put the camera down by my side and slipped on the lens cap. In the pre-digital era, you couldn't really be sure that your photos were successful until they had actually been developed, and of course there was no way to review them and delete those that didn't meet expectations! I had already taken half-a-dozen shots, far more than I had expected to on my first afternoon with the new camera.

But, with the photos taken to my satisfaction, I apparently had no reason to remain sitting above the village on the seat-sized flat rock in the warm afternoon sunshine, and I did tell myself that I should be making a move. Yet, I also knew I had no reason to rush back down to my house either, and several times I rose to my feet, ready to make my way back to my house. And several times I sat back down again. Finally, I heaved a huge sigh and remained seated. Well, I asked myself, what's wrong with just being where I am?

And after asking myself that question, I also had to ask myself how come I hadn't been there until now? I had already been based in Yuen Leng village for nearly five months, with the footpath up the hill behind my house clearly visible from the window at the back of my house, and only a few metres from it. Yet, I had never even thought of actually climbing it until now. I laughed at the absurdity of it: I had just discovered a mountain behind my house!

Aerial views of any place, but particularly somewhere where one has spent a lot of time, can have a profound effect on a person's state of mind. They tend to put everything back in the correct perspective, and this view certainly did that for me. Even though I was only perhaps 15 or 20 metres above the village.

I could see not only my house and the houses around it, but several of my neighbours, including my nearest neighbour who was talking to his mother while she tended to their vegetables. I laughed out loud again, at the thought of shouting and waving to him; perhaps he would be so taken by surprise, as he had been during lunar New Year celebrations, that he would wave back! And when I laughed, I noticed that the man looked around himself, as if looking for the source of laughter. I couldn't be sure that it was due to having heard me laugh, but it was possible. After all, he was only a couple of hundred metres away.

Yet I felt I *could* be sure that the man would never think to look halfway up the hillside for the possible source of laughter. I was sure that his field of vision was locked onto the village and its surroundings, at somewhere around his own height, and lower. For him, the hills and mountains on the peripheries of his field of vision were no more than vague shapes most of the time. I was sure that he wouldn't even notice if they changed shape. The reason I was so sure of this was that I knew the same thing applied to me. I had to admit it; until about half-an-hour previously, I hadn't even noticed anything at all about the hills and mountains surrounding my abode, apart from their existence, and even then I had only noticed that in a vague and imprecise sort of way.

A wave of melancholy washed over me, finally leaving me feeling somehow depleted of energy. How could I have been living where I had been for months, barely noticing my surroundings beyond the village, I asked myself? Now, I felt I didn't have the energy to go back down the hill even if I wanted to, and I lay back on the warm earth of the path, taking the late afternoon sunshine full on. I felt I had reached a point of catharsis, but for some reason it had left me without the energy to do anything other than continue to look out over Yuen Leng



village.

Finally, knowing the dying sun would soon provide no more light for me to see, I made my way back down the hill. Just before I did, I looked towards the higher terrain to my right, the north, and told myself: "that's where I'm going next..."

## New Perspectives, New Lifestyle

After returning to my house, I assessed the 'events' of the afternoon. Even though I told myself that nothing had actually happened, in truth, just seeing the village and its surroundings from this new perspective, above it, had certainly brought about an overwhelming change in my sentiment.

That change had not been entirely welcome at first, because I didn't particularly like being plunged into sadness. But overall, I had enjoyed the hour or more I had spent above the village. I had enjoyed the exercise involved in getting up there, I had enjoyed being in the warm sunshine; I had enjoyed being close to nature, and I had enjoyed seeing the place I lived from a new perspective. Perhaps more than anything, I had enjoyed the change from my regular routine.

I vowed that one way or another, I was indeed going to have more of this. I had noticed higher terrain to the north. I wasn't sure exactly how to get there, but I decided that come what may, I was going there, and before too long.

The whole experience of being above the village brought to mind a story told to me many years before by a friend of mine, about his fussy and fastidious uncle, whom I jokingly referred to as his Uncle Uptight. This man was constantly finding fault with my friend, lecturing him on his dress, his incorrect grammar, slovenly appearance, and so on. On the one occasion I met him, he had given me a long lecture about the loss of moral values in the young generation.

One sunny Sunday afternoon, by some weird twist of fate, he happened to take his wife and teenage daughter on an outing to the hills not far from their home, in England's West Midlands. After driving into hilly countryside, they came across two hang gliding instructors who were providing tandem hang gliding experiences to anybody who may be interested. In this mode of hang gliding, a passenger is locked onto the hang glider above the pilot. No experience or skills are required; the passenger is only there to witness.

According to my friend's re-telling of this story, one instructor was about to leave the starting point on a flight. He had a customer, a girl not much older than Uncle Uptight's daughter, who was about to take to the air. The other instructor had given up waiting for a customer who had failed to turn up at the appointed time, and so had nothing to do but wait around on the off-chance of a passerby taking enough interest to take a flight. He got three.

Uncle Uptight's daughter got into a short conversation with the older girl who was about to leave, and was mesmerised by the hang glider taking to the air. She almost pleaded with her father to let her take a flight too. Initially, although also fascinated by the spectacle of the first hang glider taking to the air, he had flatly refused. It took a long discussion with the remaining instructor on the degree of danger in taking such a flight to change that. The instructor provided enough statistics to convince Uncle Uptight that hang gliding was not as dangerous as it looked. Eventually, the man agreed, but there was a problem: The instructor was offering a significant discount if all three people took flights, one after another. After an agreement had been reached on costs and methods of payment, that was what happened. The day was a very memorable one for all three family members, and according to my friend, his cousin had talked about it for weeks afterwards.

But for his uncle, the effect had been much more profound. Less than 30 minutes in the air, seeing his world in miniature far below, had an effect on him that lasted many years. Thereafter, he became more tolerant, magnanimous, and easy-going; less nitpicking, critical, and pedantic.

At the time I heard my friend's description of his uncle's transformation, I found it very amusing and more than a little hard to believe. But, even if it were true, I certainly never imagined that something similar could happen to me. I considered myself to already be tolerant, magnanimous, and easy-going. Not to mention broad-minded, unprejudiced, genial, good-humoured, charming, easy to get along with, and able to see the big picture without

taking to the air! So I was concerned that apparently I had somehow, without even noticing it, become obsessed with my unfriendly neighbours and my life among them in that little village.

I vowed that I was going to spend as much time as possible getting more aerial views, not only of the village I lived in, but of all Hong Kong. I knew the territory to be made up mostly of hilly terrain; there had to be dozens of footpaths up into the hills like the one behind my house, I told myself.

Consulting my Lonely Planet guidebook to Hong Kong & Macau, I found that was indeed the case, and I had even hiked a part of one of these trails on Lantau Island (the largest island in Hong Kong's territory, to the west of Hong Kong Island) eight years earlier on my second visit to the territory, but that trip had somehow slipped from my memory almost completely. I read that one could pick up government-published maps of all the official hiking trails in the territory at the General Post Office in Central, and so I went there before my English classes in Taikoo Shing one afternoon. I didn't have any idea which particular trails I wanted to hike, so I just asked for the five most popular.

Perusing the maps after I arrived back home late in the evening, I concluded that the nearest interesting-looking trail to my house was the Pat Sin Leng Trail, or 'Eight Immortals Ridge Trail'. This trail runs along a ridge featuring eight peaks ranging in height from 489 metres to 590, and I learnt that it was also part of a larger trail called the Wilson Trail, after a former Hong Kong governor. I would get there via Cloudy Hill, a 440 metre-high peak even nearer to my house.

## Chapter Two: The Way of The Mountain Hiker

So, in retrospect, I was certainly of the opinion that a camera could change someone's life. Provided that this notion was not taken too literally, of course. My Minolta did not do anything of its own accord to prevent any otherwise imminent demise. But the interest in photography it re-kindled changed the course of my life, and for the better. And who knows where I would have ended up without that spark of enthusiasm ignited by having this device to give structure and meaning to my time in Hong Kong?

### The First Photographic Obsession

Any photographer can become obsessed with taking photos of only one subject, to the exclusion of all else. This is something that goes further than specialising in a particular subject, which is often guided only by commercial considerations.

My first photographic obsession, which was certainly completely free of any commercial considerations, was relatively short-lived and came upon me almost unnoticed. As I had convinced myself there was nothing much in Hong Kong worth using up film on, it was easy for the subject of abandoned houses to establish itself as a photographic obsession; it was just an exception to the 'nothing worth shooting' rule, as there are always exceptions to any rule. Nothing remarkable about that, and even as an exception it didn't warrant wasting too much film on.

My second photo with my new camera had been of the remains of the house next to my own. I discovered two other abandoned houses in the village that had gone to ruin, and took several photos of both. Their demise seemed to say something about life in the rural New Territories.

Prior to the era of British colonial rule, there had been little in the way of official cadastral demarcation in the New Territories, and even after becoming a British territory, Hong Kong's colonial rulers took a 'hands off' approach to property ownership in the New Territories. The Guest People (the Hakka) settled in all the areas of usable land that the Local People (the Cantonese) didn't fight to the death to prevent them inhabiting, and property ownership for any building was in the hands of whichever male family head built it, on land safely within village boundaries.

Over decades of British rule, hostilities between the two ethnic groups lessened, and both groups found a new target for ethnic prejudice in their new political masters.

Nevertheless, the British colonial rulers dealt with both ethnic groups fairly evenhandedly, and in the 1950s and 1960s, it could not have escaped the notice of even the most insular of New Territories Hakka villages that there was a constant flow of refugees from Mao's despotic rule in China, desperate to traverse the New Territories to get to the safety of Kowloon's shantytowns. Life was definitely far better in the gweilo-administered territory of Hong Kong than it was in communist China.

And by the late 1960s, before the British colonial government saw the need to embark on its New Territories 'New Towns' development programme, to lessen the demographic overload on Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, a population flow from the more remote New Territories villages also got underway. Young people, the first of the baby-boom generation, saw little to keep them in their villages and many decided instead to take their chances and look for their fortunes in urban Hong Kong. Many of those who couldn't conveniently commute to urban Hong Kong, simply moved there, only returning to their villages on holidays.

The Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong dealt a powerful blow to confidence which led to an increase in emigration from the territory, but the June 1989 Tiananmen Massacre hit Hong Kong like a sledgehammer. It had an effect there not seen anywhere else in the world.

Many young people from urban Hong Kong had travelled north to take part in Beijing's democracy demonstrations; some had been killed, and many more had witnessed killings first-hand. The significance of the massacre, broadcast live on television worldwide and denied outright by the one-party state within two days of its happening, could not have been clearer: this was the regime that was going to be taking over from Britain in the

running of Hong Kong in 1997. Suddenly, 1997 didn't seem so far away anymore.

Between that time and the time my first photographic obsession took hold, nearly one-sixth of Hong Kong's 1989 population had emigrated. Most were from urban Hong Kong, but even the most remote New Territories villages were not unaffected by the significance of what had happened in Beijing and elsewhere in China. Looking at the two abandoned houses in my village, now slowly going to ruin, I could imagine how the villagers who had inhabited those houses - probably for generations - had left them, locked and bolted with heavy-duty padlocks, in the remote hope that one day they may be coming back. But in fact, the first time I saw those houses, I wasn't sure if 1997 had been a factor in their being abandoned.

Yuen Leng Village, being close to a major highway, was relatively unaffected by the kind of population depletion that affected some of the territory's more remote villages. The few villagers who had noticed the ghost-fellow of Yuen Leng taking photos of those abandoned houses must have taken it as proof that the foreign devil was truly off the rails. But by that time, I cared very little what my neighbours thought of me.

### A Ghost Man in a Ghost Village

It's only appropriate that a ghost-fellow in Hong Kong's New Territories eventually find himself a ghost village, and this is what happened to me.

The first major hike I undertook with reference to the maps I had obtained at the General Post Office in Central, and one I would take many more times, was the previously-mentioned Pat Sin Leng Trail. Not knowing how long the hike would take me, I set off very early – at the crack of dawn – one Sunday morning, first taking the surfaced road that skirted a neighbouring village before ascending to Cloudy Hill.

The Eight Immortals Ridge forms the highest part on a kind of large headland or peninsula that lies to the north-east of Yuen Leng village, overlooking Tai Po, and the Tolo Harbour area to the south. Though it later became a very popular trail, in the mid-1990s it was certainly well off the beaten track of hiking trails. In perhaps two dozen hikes I only encountered other hikers on two or three occasions. As I was not particularly fond of local people, whether Cantonese or Hakka, that suited me fine. I thoroughly enjoyed the peace and quiet, the pristine environment, and the spectacular views to the south and east, which went far beyond what I had imagined, including the rugged terrain of the Saikung peninsula to the south of Tolo Harbour, and a scattering of smaller peninsulas, promontories and islands, set among a sparkling sea. If the aerial view of Yuen Leng village could be said to have put my life in that little village into perspective, and initiated my interest in hiking the hills and mountains of Hong Kong, that was nothing compared to the aerial views this trail had to offer. At elevations of over 500 metres, these views put the whole of Hong Kong into perspective, as a huge chunk of the territory was visible in one sweeping view. Looking in the other direction, to the north-east, the PRC border boom town of Shenzhen was clearly visible, and it was only by seeing the city from this perspective that I realised exactly where it was and just how close it was.

I began to appreciate what a great little place the territory of Hong Kong actually was, and even began to feel somewhat fortunate to be living there. After all, not everywhere in the world has terrain reaching elevations of seven, eight, even over nine hundred metres within such easy reach of even the most thoroughly urbanised and densely populated areas. And yet, it wasn't just mountains that were never far away in Hong Kong; the sea was never far away either. There were over 200 islands in the territory, and ferries running between just about everywhere there was a need for them, ranging from 24-hour, round-the-clock services leaving from Central, to services that only ran a couple of times a week to the most remote islands.

Slowly, I began to reconsider my original judgement that there was nothing to take photos of in Hong Kong. But that was only after my first photographic obsession. Of course, even on the first hike, I took a few shots of the spectacular scenery, but those picture-postcard images seemed only tenuously related to my life in Hong Kong or in Yuen Leng village, almost like seeing Hong Kong from an aircraft.

On my third or fourth hike of the Eight Immortals trail, upon traversing Cloudy Hill, en route to the higher peaks of the trail, I noticed a village a little way beyond the foot of Cloudy Hill's northern side. Actually, I had seen the village on my previous hikes, but at those times visibility had been poor. This time, the view was crystal clear.

I stopped and looked down on that little settlement. There seemed to be something not quite right about the place, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. I took my Minolta from my daypack, and looked through it towards the village, with the 180 mm lens on, which allowed me to zoom in a little. But whatever it was about that village that seemed strange, I still had no way of knowing. I decided that, provided I had enough energy to spare after my Eight Immortals hike, I would go and take a look at that village, perhaps even find out if the inhabitants were mostly Hakka or Cantonese. Looking from the aerial perspective that could reveal so much otherwise unavailable information, I decided that either was a possibility. The coast lay just a short distance to the east, so at first I reckoned it could be Cantonese. But then again, it seemed very likely to be Hakka, as the route from the village to the coast didn't seem to be very well developed; the village was definitely more remote than Yuen Leng village. But it was difficult to judge with certainty from such a distance, and I finally felt I would just have to find out for myself before my return to Yuen Leng.

But by the time I actually did return to the spot where the village was visible, I had almost forgotten my commitment to take a look at the place. I had to sit down in the sunshine on a rock for a few minutes, considering whether it would really be worth the extra energy expenditure. As was the case on my previous hikes, I had started out very early, and the hike had taken most of the morning, and so I began to re-assess this initial commitment to check the place out. It wasn't the downward hike to the village I was concerned about; I knew I had enough energy for that, even though my feet were already aching a little by now. But I would have to hike all the way back up Cloudy Hill after looking at this village, which I didn't even expect to be particularly special anyway, and then hike back down the other side to Yuen Leng village.

Finally, knowing that the village had definitely re-entered my consciousness and would not leave it even if I didn't bother visiting it, I began walking down the footpath that led to it. I had a busy week of work lined up ahead of me; this Sunday was my only chance to visit the village.

## Doors Opening

Only when actually closing in on the village did I realise what was wrong with it: there were no inhabitants. The first of the one-storey stone and concrete constructions I saw, a little way to the left of the path, and slightly removed from the main body of houses was gradually being reclaimed by nature. I followed a concrete path that ran in front of this house and towards the main body of the village, very similar to the path that led to my own house at Yuen Leng village. The true state of the house was only obvious from a distance of 20 or 30 metres, because some people do deliberately grow creeping vines that cling to the outer walls of their homes.

After some hesitation, I walked over to the house. The main wooden front doors were wide open, and there were lights on inside. This didn't make any sense to me at first. Why would the residents of the house leave the lights on? Then I realised the house must have been broken into. I scanned the main living room as I walked into it, and brought my camera out to take photos. Almost everything was intact, but some things, like a couple of vases, seemed to have been deliberately smashed and thrown on the ground. Hanging on a prominent location on one wall was a photo of a man I took to be the head of the family. The glass covering the photo had also been smashed. I wondered if the thieves who had broken into the house had smashed up these things out of frustration at finding nothing worth stealing?

Yet, there was an expensive-looking, intricately-carved low wooden table towards one end of the room, and a number of other wooden and stone-carved items which seemed certain to have some value. I wondered if the thieves had failed to take them because they didn't realise their value, or simply because they couldn't carry them? There was a wide path leading up to within a few hundred metres of this village, but whether a car or van could traverse it easily was a moot point. If the thieves couldn't physically carry an item all the way back to where there were proper roads, what value could those items have to them? Or perhaps they just couldn't have been bothered with such troublesome items.

I sat down on this table, a heavy and very sad feeling coming over me. I realised that all the items in the house, and of course in every other house in the village, had to have been either brought there from outside with some considerable degree of difficulty, or else created there. I imagined scenarios of either. The village had to have had its own craftsmen at one time, but even so, when some large items had been carried to the village from outside by some villager or other, it must have been a relatively big event in the people's daily lives, eliciting the interest and excitement of neighbours, who would no doubt share in it in some way, such as by drinking tea at

the large table I was sitting on. By this time, I had of course realised that the village was far too remote to be Cantonese; it had to have been Hakka. I began to appreciate how hard life must have been for these fiercely independent people, trying to carve out an existence within the Cantonese-dominated territory.

No wonder they were insular. How could they be anything else, I asked myself? The village had probably been, unlike my own, 100% Hakka, without a single Cantonese among them. The Cantonese were those people the villagers would have had to deal with only when they left the village. And as for the foreign devils who ultimately controlled the halls of power for the territory, they were even more remote from life in this village.

At the time, although I knew, of course, about the massive increase of emigration from Hong Kong after the Tiananmen Massacre, I didn't realise what a pivotal role that event had played in ending the existence of some of Hong Kong's more remote villages. It wasn't until I came across a village with only one remaining inhabitant, who had stayed on, acting as a kind of caretaker for all the other village houses, that this became clear to me. The remaining villager explained that his village had suffered population depletion for over two decades before 1989, but after the massacre, the young family members, who almost all lived and worked in urban Hong Kong, had persuaded their parents that there wasn't going to be a Hong Kong, as they knew it, after 1997. Within a year, he told me, the village had gone from 18 families, to one - his own.

But at the time I discovered this nameless village near Cloudy Hill, I could only wonder how an entire village had come to be empty. At the time, my mind turned over and over the possibility that the villagers had left one by one, until finally none were left. Or had there been some sort of consensus, in which several, or even most families decided to leave together?

Finally, I arose from the table, and looked over the remaining rooms in the house. I was struck by the fact that the main bedroom had a rather elaborate double bed, which was still intact. As I left the bedroom, I was suddenly roused from my lethargic feelings by the sight of a black dog, or something of a similar size, running out of the house. As I emerged from the house, I looked around, but saw no sign of any such animal.

After wandering around the rest of the houses, and taking a few more shots I set off back to my village. I had made my way about a third of the way back up the hill when I turned around to look at the village again. To my utter surprise there was a man standing at the edge of the village, and he seemed to be looking up at me. So there was someone living there! But where among those houses, gradually falling to ruin did he live, I asked myself? And why hadn't he made his presence known when I was there? I concluded that the man was no more sociable than my own neighbours and probably just didn't want to speak to me.

By the time I finally arrived back at my house I was in an exuberant mood, even more so than on my first hike: I felt I had been on something of an adventure, and I couldn't get the whole thing out of my mind.

Perhaps what accentuated this feeling of adventure was that the whole experience had been completely unexpected. Hiking in the hills was itself relatively adventurous in comparison to my teaching life, but after several hikes of the same trail, I more or less knew what to expect. I was not going to come face to face with a tiger, nor was I going to be captured by a band of revolutionaries hiding out in the mountains. It wasn't even likely that I would be struck by lightning. Yet it had never even crossed my mind until I actually walked into the ghost village that an entire village not so far from my own would be completely depopulated.

I soon became obsessed with that village, and capturing it on film. I had no idea whether its one-time residents were now dead or alive; yet I gradually built up a picture of life in the village as it had been, based on the houses I had entered and things I had seen inside: family photos, altars, as well as several certificates and awards still hanging on walls. I made two more side trips to the village, both in the late morning, after my Eight Immortals trial hike. I didn't see the sole remaining resident, and couldn't work out where he could possibly live, unless he lived in conditions even a lot more basic than my own.

But the last visit I made was a few weeks later, when two of my Korean students cancelled their late afternoon classes. I didn't even hesitate in making an excuse to cancel my one remaining evening class, and quickly rushed back to Yuen Leng Village, grabbed my camera, put on my sports shoes and headed up the track to Cloudy Hill. I rarely ever encountered anyone on this surfaced track. Although cars could theoretically use it, it was really only one lane wide, which made passing difficult if another car was coming in the opposite direction. However, I had encountered, or rather had been passed by a jogger several times before, always in the late afternoon. This man, in his thirties, was powerfully built, and always ran carrying a daypack. Unlike most people,

he was at least amiable enough to nod and say hello as he passed. Of course, I had no way of knowing what was in his backpack, but it seemed to be bulging with heavy objects, like rocks. He obviously took his physical training very seriously. I would actually get to converse with this man on this occasion.

By the time I had hiked to the village, it was already late afternoon, and I had little time left to take photos before the light faded.

I used up a roll of film on the village, and thought it well worth it. I felt myself to be something like an unpaid investigative photo-journalist, and I was rather proud of my work. But living the friendless life in that Hakka village that I did, the photos were not seen by anyone else until years later.

On that occasion, I had shown the photos to my wife. I had initially felt glad that I finally had the chance to allow these almost-forgotten photos of my first photographic obsession to see the light of day. She was shocked that I had intruded on the private lives of complete strangers in the way I had, and insisted that I destroy the photos. With great reluctance, I eventually did throw away all those that had been taken inside other people's homes, but not the ones outside.

I did have an inkling that I was intruding on other peoples' lives at the time I took my photos, but, as I said, I considered myself to be a kind of unpaid investigative photo-journalist, and this sentiment took precedence. And, I also felt that I was somehow recording a piece of the territory's history before it vanished completely. I was almost certain those villagers who had left would never return. At the time, however, there was speculation that China's 'paramount ruler', Deng Xiaping, may die before 1997, and that if this happened, it could be the catalyst for a new era of political reform in China, which in turn would lead to a return of confidence in the territory's future, and even a return of those Hong Kong citizens who had emigrated.

But what brought my first photographic obsession to an end was nothing to do with the possibility of the villagers returning.

While taking a photo inside the same house where I had previously thought I caught a glimpse of a black dog, the dog, or whatever it was, made a re-appearance. This time it startled me with its closeness before running out the door. I realised it had to have been right behind me in the room when I took the photo before making its sudden exit, and that seemed very un-doglike behaviour to me. I had also not sensed its presence, which seem equally strange. I walked back out of the house, looked around, but there was nothing there.

Then, as I stood gazing at the house for a few more moments, I became aware of the man I had seen before, standing stock still by the side of one of the other remaining houses. He was little more than a shadow in the corner of my right eye. The thought crossed my mind that he was actually enjoying this hide-and-seek type game of only making his presence felt when I couldn't actually talk to him. I deliberately let my attention focus on the doorway of the house, mumbled something to myself and put my hands on my hips, as though I was engrossed in thought on something about the house and hadn't noticed the man in the corner of my eye, who I was sure had a big grin on his face.

I swiftly turned to face the shadow in the corner of my eye, and the most remarkable thing happened. It seemed to melt away into the shadows of the house it had been standing by. I looked all around, 360 degrees, and once again the man was nowhere to be seen. This visual phenomenon was intriguing; how, I asked myself, had he accomplished this incredible disappearing act? Then I became aware that it was not merely a visual phenomenon. I had the feeling that for a few seconds there had been total silence all around, not a single sound. Then the sounds of birds and insects suddenly returned. However, the elusive resident had, somehow, quickly and soundlessly slipped out of sight once again, and this was something I was beginning to find very frustrating.

I mumbled audibly in Cantonese a word meaning 'boring' or 'annoying', to make it clear I was tired of his game.

I then felt a chill; it was getting late and I had to be making a move. As I made my way up the hillside, I turned and looked back at the village, half-expecting to see the man standing at the edge of the village once again, looking up at me. He wasn't there. For a moment, I felt I may have offended him by making it clear I didn't like his childish game. But before I could consider this possibility any further, I noticed the backpack jogger standing at the top of the footpath, at the point where it met his regular running route. He seemed to be getting his breath back and he had put his heavy pack on the ground next to him. I didn't expect him to still be standing there, doing stretching exercises, when I got to the top of the path a few minutes later, but he was.

He smiled and nodded to me before making a gesture towards the village that was somewhere between pointing and discarding something. "Nothing in that village", he told me in Cantonese. "It's abandoned; been empty for years now..."

"I know", I replied. "Just been looking around the place; exploring it a bit". I then felt the need to correct him, coupled with an urge to see how far our conversation would go. After all, exchanges of more than a couple of sentences with local people had long been a rarity for me by this time. "Actually, there is one fellow still living there. I've seen him a couple of times, but never spoken to him."

The athlete looked at me with a puzzled expression as if what I had said sounded crazy. "No", he told me with finality and a shake of his head, "I guarantee you; the place is completely abandoned. I knew the last villager to leave; that was nearly five years ago. There is no water supply there anymore; nobody could possibly live there."

I shrugged. "Maybe the guy I saw was from somewhere else nearby, just looking around, like me."

The man shook his head again as if disregarding my suggestion. Then he looked thoughtful for a few moments, before telling me: "I wouldn't go back there again if I were you. There's nothing there, really. Anyway...it's not...healthy!"

After that, he picked up his backpack and told me he had to be getting back. "Well, you should know!" I mumbled as he ran off, humoured by his strange choice of words. At first I had no intention of taking the runner's advice. But perhaps because such verbal exchanges were few and far between, this one stayed in my mind, and I began to feel there could indeed be 'healthier' things to be doing than taking photos of ghost villages.

## The Second Photographic Obsession

I didn't consider my first photographic obsession to be an obsession at the time, nor my second. But by the time my second photographic obsession took hold, I had come across two other villages - really just hamlets - on trails in the northern New Territories, which were completely abandoned, and several others with seriously depleted populations, and many abandoned houses. Every single one of them was, or had once been, a Hakka village. But none were as eerie as the first.

Nevertheless, as I continued using up virtually all my free time on explorations of the territory, and even before my second photographic obsession took hold, I began to wonder how I had come to use up so much film on an abandoned village? Perhaps I had gone a little bit overboard. The spectacular views provided by places like the Eight Immortals ridge had brought me to the realisation that there were indeed at least some views worth taking photos of in Hong Kong apart from those from Victoria Peak, but getting lost in taking photos of abandoned homes began to seem a little obsessive.

In addition to the Eight Immortals hike, and regular hikes up Cloudy Hill, I had covered a number of other trails in the New Territories, and for the most part enjoyed both the hiking and the aerial views. But I also knew that sooner or later, as a now-serious Hong Kong hiker, I would have to tackle The Big One

The longest, and most famous of Hong Kong's many hiking trails was (and is) the MacLehose Trail. Even before I began hiking the territory I had heard of this trail, though I had no idea then where it was. It was named after a previous governor of Hong Kong, Murray MacLehose, who had overseen a period of exceptional economic growth in the territory after the Maoist-inspired instability of the late 1960s, and before 1997 became an issue. It was also MacLehose who had been responsible for establishing the Country Parks, natural areas beyond the limits of urban development, several of which I would hike through on my MacLehose Trail hike.

With a total length of 100 kilometres, the MacLehose Trail traverses the New Territories, east to west.

But after looking at my map of the trail, I decided I would walk it west to east, at least to somewhere around halfway along the trail, as this would be more convenient in terms of transportation. It would take me at least four, perhaps as many as six hikes to complete the trail, depending on difficulty. In this way, regardless of where I finished up a hike, I would end it progressively nearer to the centre, which would also be progressively more



convenient for me to return to my living quarters. After completing about half the trail in this way, I would adopt a similar approach for the eastern half, starting out at the furthest point and working back towards the central section.

There were several other considerations for starting the trail in reverse, but the main one of these was that I knew the western New Territories, particularly close to Kowloon, to be much more industrialised and urbanised than the east. With such a long trail, which I would have to tackle over a number of days, I was concerned that I might lose interest before finishing the trail if I saw it becoming increasingly urban. Beginning it in reverse, with the less industrialised Saikung peninsula waiting for me later at the eastern end, I felt I would have more motivation to complete the trail. And I had already decided that this trail was one I just *had* to take; even though there would be no-one I could boast to of having walked it. I just wanted the inner satisfaction of having walked the trail in its entirety.

After travelling to Tuen Mun, a New Town in the western New Territories, and taking a bus to the trail's starting point (or ending point, for most hikers), I began the trail on a sunny weekday morning. At this time, most of my hikes were still weekend or public holiday hikes, but whenever my Korean students cancelled their classes for any reason at all, I didn't have to consider how to use my free time. On this occasion, I had a whole day free, which made it an ideal day to start the MacLehose hike and hopefully get the first 20 kilometres or more out of the way.

Shortly after beginning my hike, I reached an open area providing a spectacular overview of a large part of western Hong Kong. I sat down on a rock in the warm morning sunshine, and looked down on Tsuen Wan, the first of the New Territories' New Towns, on the edge of the Kowloon peninsula. The island of Tsing Yi, which lies to the west of Tsuen Wan was clearly visible, as was the much larger island of Lantau beyond, although the west of Lantau was lost in mist. Much of Kowloon was visible, but the narrow part of Victoria Harbour between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island was a white haze with the buildings of the island's northern waterfront merely a stylised shape seemingly floating in the mist. I looked on, my attention fully captured.

The sounds closest to me were mostly birdsong. Urban Hong Kong Island and Kowloon were merely a hum in the background, and even the sounds of industry in the much closer Tuen Mun were a comfortable distance away. But I thought I had also clearly heard the sound of a jet aircraft, although I hadn't actually seen one.

A couple of minutes later, I heard the sound again. This time I saw the airliner, approaching from above Lantau and taking a flight path from the right of my vision to the left, or from above Lantau Island to the east side of Kowloon, where Tai Tak (or Kaitak) international Airport was located. I saw the plane slowly fade from view in the mist above Kowloon, its engines becoming almost inaudible at the same time. Captivated by the scene, I was almost unable to continue on my way before I had witnessed two or three more planes follow the same trajectory.

I then continued on my hike. The far western section of the trail was not, as I had feared, a semi-urban hike; the land was beyond development and mostly given over to a reservoir (the Tai Lam Chung Reservoir). However, I did find this part of the hike a little dull and boring, with nothing much to see but the reservoir itself.

Without anything like the spectacular views I had seen before reaching the reservoir, I had plenty of time to turn some things over in my mind. Particularly the spectacle of those planes arriving in Hong Kong. I knew the approach to Kai Tak that they had taken to be the same one I had travelled on most of my arrivals in the territory. By the time Kai Tak became an airport of regular use for me, I had already flown into and/ or out of about 30 international airports. So I knew Kai Tak to be unusual. But I began asking myself if perhaps it was more than merely unusual?

After all, I had taken planes to and from dozens of other airports in Europe, Asia and north America by this time, and when I came to think about it, I realised that I knew of none other quite like it, with its runway jutting out into Victoria Harbour.

After traversing the Tai Lam Country Park, I finished my hike that day in the Tai Mo Shan Country Park, at the beginning of the ascent up the 957 metre Taimoshan, the highest peak in the territory. This was an appropriate place to finish, because there was zero possibility of me actually completing the entire Taimoshan hike that same day

## One of a Kind

Before I tackled what would for me be the second section of the MacLehose Trail - the Tai Mo Shan Country Park - I had the opportunity to drop in at Shatin Library, and there I read some books and other publications about Kai Tak Airport, or at least dealing with Kai Tak. I gleaned the following information, which I was also able to associate with my own many arrival and departure experiences:

Physically, Kai Tak was a 'one-runway wonder', unlike most of its high traffic volume peers. That single runway was bi-directional, and operationally named Runway 13/31 ('One-Three' and 'Three-One'). For Runway 13, which was the one I had usually arrived on, and the one that the planes I had seen at the beginning of my MacLehose hike would arrive on, it was the approach over the built-up urban area of Kowloon which was difficult. For Runway 31 (which ran in the opposite direction, alongside 13), landings were generally straightforward, coming in over the sea. It was take-off that was more demanding, but for the same reason as landings on 13 were difficult: the buildings of the urban districts, and the hilly terrain to their north.

For take-offs from Runway 31, planes had to ascend very steeply to clear the buildings, while, of course, flying too high was not an option for the approach on 13. For take-off from 31, it was the hilly terrain which was the bigger problem; as soon as an aircraft had enough altitude, it would have to bank to avoid Beacon Hill and Lion Rock, two of the row of peaks separating the Kowloon peninsula from the New Territories to the north. These locations, I also learnt, were places I would encounter on my MacLehose Trail hike.

The airport's runway had been made by reclaiming land from the harbour, and had already been extended several times by late 1993, when I began taking an interest in it. By the time the airport closed four years later, the runway would have reached a length of 3,390 metres.

I learnt that aircraft following the flight path I had seen from my MacLehose hike continued on a straight trajectory until they reached a point called the 'Checkpoint Turn' before making the final approach to Runway 13. This also dovetailed with my own experiences; I could remember many times when the plane I was in banked to the right before making the final approach, though I had no idea how the decision as to exactly when to bank had been made. From my readings, I learnt that precisely when to make the Checkpoint Turn was a decision made by the pilot without any technological assistance. When the pilot saw a hill called Checkpoint Hill (really just a huge slab of rock with a check design painted on one side) directly to the right of the aircraft, it was time to turn! At this point, the aircraft would still be at a height of about 250 metres or more. Although a constant feature of life for the residents below, aircraft noise at this point was not what it was for the residents of the Kowloon City district bordering the airport.

Coming out of the banking manoeuvre, a hundred metres or more lower, not only vehicles, but also people on the street became visible to passengers on the plane. It was generally accepted in aviation, or so I read, that to abort the landing of a large aircraft like a jumbo jet, an altitude of over 200 metres was needed. That couldn't be done in the middle of a steep bank, like at Checkpoint. But by the time a plane landing at Kai Tak had levelled out for landing, its altitude would be less than that. In other words, if it was discovered at that point that the landing had to be aborted, it would be too late. Needless to say, all major airlines assigned only very experienced pilots for flights arriving at Kai Tak.

In theory, this was one of the most dangerous airports in the world, and it was without a shadow of a doubt the most dangerous major international airport of its scale. Yet in all my arrivals in the territory, I had never thought of it as such. In practice, it was - at least in its final two decades of operation - far from being the most dangerous. By 1995, when most of my photos of the airport were taken, Kai Tak's traffic volume was way beyond capacity. The airport was handling close to 30 million passengers a year, plus 1.56 million tonnes of freight, making it the third busiest airport in the world in terms of international passenger traffic, and the busiest in terms of international cargo throughput. Yet, of the four major incidents in the airport's last 20 years of operation, only two resulted in fatalities, a total of 13 deaths. This compares very favourably with several major international airports in the same league (yet not quite as busy).

After reading up on the airport at Shatin Library, I began to feel very excited about the prospects of taking photos of it from further along my hike of the MacLehose trail, as I felt sure there had to be points at which the airport was visible - in fact, there were even some photos in the books I looked at that seemed to have been taken from the trail. I wondered how I had even come to neglect taking photos of Kai Tak on my early visits. The airport certainly seemed to be one of a kind, an absolutely unique airport, and the more I learnt about it, the more I

became convinced that was the case.

However, before I even hiked the Tai Mo Shan Country Park section of the MacLehose Trail, something happened that elevated Kai Tak Airport from merely something I had to get photos of to something I had to dedicate all my free time to, and the MacLehose took second place on my list of photographic priorities.

In the late afternoon one day, a week or two after my first MacLehose hike, I had an English class in Taikoo Shing with a Korean boy of 10 or 11 years of age, with the English name of Jackson.

At some point in the class, Jackson suddenly stopped reading from his textbook and stated excitedly: "Teacher, I almost forgot! Did you see the plane in the sea?"

"The plane in the sea?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

Jackson led me to the balcony of their apartment with a beaming smile, looking back towards me several times as if to check my response. The balcony provided a clear view across Victoria Harbour to Kai Tak. To my utter amazement, there was an aircraft partially visible in the water just beyond the runway, its tail completely out of the water, the front of the plane almost submerged.

With some help from his mother - who was very surprised I hadn't heard the news - Jackson explained that the previous day a China Airlines plane from Taiwan had failed to stop before reaching the end of the runway at Kai Tak, and ended up in the shallow water beyond. Nobody had died in the accident but after its passengers had been rescued the plane remained in the water.

On my way back to Yuen Leng Village after my classes, at the first MTR station, I picked up the last copy on a news stand of Hong Kong's second-biggest selling English-language newspaper, the Hongkong Standard, and got the rest of the story.

China Airlines Flight 605 was a daily flight from Taipei to Hong Kong, arriving in Hong Kong at 7:00 am. The previous day, in stormy weather conditions, it had overshot the runway at Kai Tak. The aircraft was almost brand new, with only about five months of service.

Flight 605 touched down over 640 metres beyond the point on the runway it should have. After the aircraft touched down, the co-pilot had taken control of the plane and attempted to keep it on a central course. The pilot meanwhile had inadvertently increased engine power rather than activating the thrust reversers. The plane slid off the left side of the runway end and into Victoria Harbour, after swerving to avoid collision with incoming planes on runway 31, and came to rest in shallow water there. Nobody was seriously hurt, and the passengers and crew were evacuated without incident.

I was unsurprised to later learn that the pilot refused to accept responsibility for the accident, and blamed it on the runway being too short!

I knew this was something I absolutely had to get some photos of. My only fear was that by the time I returned to Taikoo Shing with my camera the next day, the plane would already have been pulled out of the water. As it turned out, the plane remained in the water for many weeks due to disagreements over who should be responsible for footing the bill for salvaging it.

The following day I took a short excursion from my tutoring in Taikoo Shing to visit Quarry Bay Park, the bay-side park adjacent to the housing estate I taught at. The location was a perfect one from which to take a photo of the half-submerged plane from as it lay just beyond the end of the runway, with a clear view over to it. I was not the only person there with the same idea; I noticed a couple of other photographers preparing to take shots of the plane. After a cursory scan of the park, it struck me that the best location to take a photo was a pedestrian overpass. This provided a vantage point several metres higher than ground level, so the vegetation and the man-made constructions of the park, such as its fencing, were less of a consideration.

As I looked on at the submerged plane, I made a decision on the spur of the moment to visit Taiwan as soon as I possibly could. One factor that led me to this decision was that my girlfriend from Taipei had visited me in Hong Kong several months previously, and it was about time I made a return visit, if only to check that she was indeed still my girlfriend! But apart from that, I also had an ulterior motive: I thought that provided the aircraft had not yet

been salvaged, I may be able to get an aerial photo of it as my own plane took off. I booked a Cathay Pacific morning flight to Taoyuan International Airport (or Chiang Kai-shek International Airport as it was still known in those days) right there in Taikoo Shing even before returning to Yuen Leng village. I paid for and collected the ticket the next day, which was a heavily discounted ticket with no possibility for altering the flight schedule. It would give me just two days in Taiwan, but I felt that was enough for my needs. I then made some excuses for taking a couple of days off from my home tutoring classes, and took the flight the next day.

## Seizing and Missing Opportunities

Finally, after over a year 'stuck' in Hong Kong - the longest period of time I had spend in any one country or territory since I began travelling in 1981, I was on the road again, or at least in the air again, albeit if for only a relatively short trip, to Taiwan.

I had hoped to be able to take a photo of the China Airlines plane with its tail and rear fuselage still sticking out the water, but for whatever reason (perhaps the plane was considered an obstacle), my plane took off from Runway 31, heading away from the submerged aircraft. Most take-offs were in the opposite direction.

But those from Runway 31 were also interesting to observe. When lined up for take-off on runway 31, Lion Rock and Beacon Hill, two of the peaks to the north of Kowloon (495 and 457 metres high respectively), would be right in front of the aircraft. The aircraft had to climb steeply to avoid the buildings of Kowloon, then make a sharp left turn and continue climbing steeply soon after take-off to avoid the terrain. The climb would be steep enough to cause discomfort for some people but that was far preferable to the discomfort that could possibly be caused if the aircraft failed to gain clearance.

At the time of this take-off, I could already recognise Lion Rock and Beacon Hill from the books I had perused in Shatin Library, and knew that they did indeed lie along the MacLehose Trail, but I hadn't yet reached them on my hikes of the trail.

Through no fault of my own, I had missed the chance to get what I thought would have been an absolutely unique photo: the half-submerged China Airlines aircraft, preferably with some of the runway visible, as seen from the air above it. I was disappointed, as I didn't hold out much hope that the plane would still be in the water when I returned. Obviously, it seemed to me, the longer the plane was left in the water the more difficult it would be to salvage and a commercial airliner is not a cheap piece of equipment; it stood to reason that China Airlines would want to cut their losses.

All outdoor photography is principally about seizing, or failing to seize opportunities. A certain scene presents itself, perhaps a particular event, perhaps a particular quality of light, and the photographer, apart from needing to be prepared to take a shot, also needs to make a decision about whether to take it or not. In the digital era, with no difference in cost, the shot is more than likely to be taken anyway, but in the pre-digital era, there was always the added consideration of whether a shot seemed certain to be worth the film.

My trip to Taiwan on this occasion was characterised by a series of missed photo opportunities and the disappointing results of those opportunities that were taken. Paradoxically, however, this did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm for photography, in fact just the opposite. By this time, my former interest in photography had been completely re-kindled, and I was more than willing to write off my bad luck as par for the course. Any outdoor photographer has their good days and their bad days.

Apart from that, as far as Hong Kong and Kai Tak were concerned, I had also come to the realisation that I was living in a unique territory, in a unique era, with an absolutely unique airport! And if I failed to get some particular shot of it, that didn't bother me very much. I would get others, and the cumulative results mattered more. But what mattered most of all was that I tried.

I was also encouraged by something I had read in a book by a well-known outdoor photographer, Galen Rowell. He commented that if a mechanic fixed only one in 10 cars or a banker made mistakes in nine out of 10 accounts, they would soon be out on the street. But a photographer who gets only one good shot in 50 may still be a great success. So I knew that even the most talented outdoor photographers didn't get great pictures every time they pressed the shutter.

Things had changed with my girlfriend, Kate, since I had left Taipei. She now worked for Singapore Airlines, and had moved from Taipei city's fairly central Da-an district to Shindian (also written Xindian), a satellite town to the south of Taipei city. But at least she hadn't found someone new! After 'checking in' to my girlfriend's new studio flat in a nondescript apartment block, I took her on a joy ride on a scooter she had arranged to borrow the use of from a friend for a couple of days. I was pleased to see that there was plenty of natural scenery not far away from her new address and commented that I would be able to spend some time in the nearby hills and mountains taking photos while she was at work the next day.

"What for?" she asked after a few moments with what sounded like genuine puzzlement. I explained that I had a new camera and was finding new interest in photography, and at the same time found I had to explain that I previously had an interest in photography, realising that in the several years I had known her there had been nothing to indicate that I had once been a keen photographer. Her reaction should have been taken as an ominous sign, but I took it as the only natural reaction likely, given that she still knew nothing about my photography hobby.

My excursions into the hills during my first two days in Taipei were like a lesson in how not to be a nature photographer. I took a few unremarkable close-up shots of flowering plants and a couple of shots of a hazy Taipei city in the distance.

While riding the scooter along a remote, one-lane road deep in the hills to the south of Shindian, the largest lizard I had ever seen in Taiwan ran across the road right in front of me. I stopped the bike, got off, and took a close look at the place it had disappeared from sight, hoping it would re-appear. Only after a long wait did I realise how ridiculous the idea of it re-appearing was. If I were a lizard and had barely escaped being run over by a human-driven vehicle, would I come back to see if the human was still there? For all the lizard could know I may want to eat it!

Shortly after this event, or non-event, I arrived at a grassy open space at the side of the road. It was large enough to park two or three cars, and as I parked my motorcycle I noticed several colourful long-tailed birds taking off from a nearby tree and flying to one further away. I later learnt that they were Formosan blue magpies, Taiwan's national bird, but at that time I had never seen a blue magpie before, and in fact they were not as plentiful then as they later became as a protected species. The tree they had flown away to was a little way down the hillside, and I could see where they were. I waited, hoping those beautiful long-tailed birds would come back, but of course they had no reason to, so they didn't.

I sat on a square, carved rock in the pleasant autumn sunshine. The rock was one of a line of rocks marking the boundary of that open, human-tended space and the wild, uncultivated vegetation of the hills. After a snack and a can of cold coffee I remained there for a long time, and the quiet of the environment not only put me at ease but also another creature, one of a kind I had never seen before.

Before that happened, I heard several unearthly cries from somewhere in the undergrowth nearby. I stood up, and scanned my surroundings, asking myself what on Earth had made those cries? After a few moments I sat back down again, but I was now mentally very alert and ready to move quickly if necessary. I surmised the cries could have come from a wild boar, and I knew these animals were common in the hills and mountains of Taiwan.

There was also no reason that the presence of a wild boar should have worried me. But although I knew a wild boar would have no reason to attack me, my imagination kept conjuring up images of several wild boars suddenly appearing, seeing me as an enemy who had intruded on their territory and charging at me. Then I heard those strange cries again, only more distant. I breathed a sigh of relief; they were moving further away.

No sooner had that happened than I caught sight of an animal that had entered the open space of short grass from the opposite corner. It was perhaps only five or six metres away and seemed to be on a slow diagonal track which would take it only a metre or two from where I was sitting. I kept perfectly still, hardly even breathing.

The animal was, I later learnt, called a muntjac; a kind of miniature deer the size of a smallish dog, and in fact they are also called 'barking deer' for the strange, barking-like cries they make, which I had found so unsettling. I felt lucky to be witnessing it at such close quarters but realised also that the main reason it seemed unconcerned by my presence was simply that it hadn't noticed me. When it did, there seemed to be a moment of indecision, perhaps even incomprehension. I was careful at this time not to move even my eyes and just for a brief moment

I thought it would continue to ignore me, and I would be able to reach slowly and quietly for my camera.

Then it panicked! Suddenly, the animal literally spun around full circle two or three times, as if in a state of alarm so intense that it had been rendered unable to decide where to run, before finally leaping into the air in the direction it had come from, and a couple of seconds later it had disappeared from sight.

I felt very sorry for this creature; after all I only wanted to shoot it with a camera, not a gun. I also began to feel that I was simply not cut out to be a wildlife photographer and looked forward to being back in urban Taipei, where I felt sure I would be able to get some decent photos.

## Add Vantage for Advantage

The odds are heavily stacked against a shoestring photographer taking any worthwhile photographs at all. Especially the shoestring photographer with only a smattering of technical knowledge and little in the way of natural talent, such as myself.

And even given technical knowledge and natural talent, there's still very little that a brilliant photographer can do with just a box camera to work with while there are other photographers out there taking shots of the same scenes with gear like the Nikon and the Canon sold in the shop I where had bought my Minolta.

This would be like hoping to win a motorcycle road racing grand prix on a moped, or hoping to make a name in the world of rock guitar, playing only a ukulele. Even with the talent of a Jimi Hendrix, Carlos Santana or Mark Knopfler, you still couldn't do it. I draw these two analogies only because they were once interests of mine; many other examples could be found to illustrate the same point.

Turning the argument around, no amount of expensive equipment will help the dimwitted, uninspired and uncreative photographer to take memorable photographs. What is needed for the aspiring photographer's dreams to become worthy of respect rather than only worthy of ridicule is some combination of passably decent photographic equipment with a passably capable photographer.

And when familiarity with equipment leads to dexterity, that can then be polished to the point that it shines like a gem. To return to the motorcycle racing analogy, that's what led a well-known sports commentator to almost shout out loud: "look at that incredible high-speed mastery! What perfect harmony between man and machine!" when racing legend Barry Sheene executed a difficult overtaking manoeuvre on one occasion I remember watching.

Of course, that kind of 'harmony between photographer and camera' is something that remains a dream for most photographers. However, the low-budget photographer is relatively lucky compared to practitioners of many other fields of endeavour, including the above-mentioned two. There are a couple of weapons shoestring photographers may have in their arsenal with which to whittle down the advantage of better equipped photographers and even up those odds. The first is a notion in photography called 'F/8 and be there!'; the other is an extension of that notion I call 'adding vantage to gain advantage'.

'f/8 and be there' is an expression popularly used by photographers to indicate the importance of being in a place where a particular picture can be taken, and just taking it rather than being too concerned about technical considerations (F/8 is a typically middle of the range f-stop, or f-number, thus what is implied is that nothing special or unusual in the settings are needed). So, by this principle, If, for example you're not located somewhere where Mount Everest is within your sight (at least with a telephoto lens), you aren't going to get a photo of Mount Everest. Thus, the shoestring photographer who is willing (and able) to travel may be able to use that fact to gain an advantage when set against better-funded and more capable photographers who no doubt *could* take great photos of Everest if they were only willing to go to all the inconvenience of getting to the right location.

As a traveller, 'being there' was something I didn't have to work too hard on; it came naturally. And you can't do travel photography without travel, so being willing and able to travel was a point in my favour.

However, being there is not always enough. Because, of course, many other photographers realise the wisdom

of the 'f/8 and be there' philosophy, and they will be there too. And many of them will be bringing their top-of-the-line gear with them! That's when the shoestring photographer has to 'add vantage to gain advantage'. In this extension, or development, of the 'f/8 and be there' philosophy, the photographer is not only at the correct location to take a photo of a desired subject, but at a unique, or at least difficult to replicate vantage point. For example, rather than just having Everest within sight like so many hiker-photographers, Everest could be viewed from a helicopter, or from part way up a nearby peak, or even part way up Everest itself.

Of course, vantage points like those could be phenomenally expensive to get to, and if you had that kind of money, acquiring top notch equipment would probably be no big deal anyway. But a 'unique or difficult to replicate' vantage point doesn't necessarily need to be expensive. While most photographers were only living up to the f/8 and be there philosophy by getting themselves somewhere near enough to the already relatively unique sight of the submerged China Airlines aircraft in Victoria Harbour, my decision to visit Taiwan was at least partly arrived at so quickly because I felt that I could kill two birds with one stone and get a shot of the aircraft (preferably with some runway visible to give it context) from the air, which would be a much more unique vantage point. (Film cameras were not regarded as electronic devices capable of interfering with navigation like smartphones, so their use wasn't prohibited at take-off and landing).

That would have been a classic example of adding vantage to gain advantage, had my plan worked. A successful photo would have been either very rare, if few other people had had the same idea and successfully executed it, or absolutely unique if nobody had, which wasn't impossible because (I believed) the plane would very soon be lifted out of the water.

Adding vantage may not always be enough to actually *gain* advantage; only enough to whittle down the advantage/s that other, better equipped photographers have over the shoestring photographer. But it's almost always a tool that can be used to some benefit. To give a couple of examples that are illustrative of the difference in degree, some years later I was again in Taipei when I decided to take some photos of the Taipei 101 skyscraper.

I now had a new camera, my first digital SLR, an Olympus E-420. This was, again - of course - a budget or entry-level SLR, but one which I had chosen very carefully, because like my previous film cameras, this model had been honoured with many excellent reviews which pointed out that its features made it an ideal camera for an aspiring but cash-strapped professional.

The weather was perfect on the day I visited the Taipei 101 for the first time, and I reflected that the building's backdrop would be a clear blue sky. I parked my motorcycle in a side street, the closest spot to the giant skyscraper I could find with a space free to park, and walked for several minutes through the hurried crowds of morning rush-hour pedestrians to the building's main, south side entrance. Before I crossed the road to the same side as the building, I noticed a photographer with a tripod, changing lenses. He seemed to be in his own bubble of attention, as separate from the crowds of office workers passing by him as I felt.

I didn't have to worry about changing lenses - I only had one! And though the pavement in front of the building was very wide by local standards, I quickly realised that I couldn't - quite - get all the building in my viewfinder, even from the very edge of the pavement. This building was over half a kilometre high, I reminded myself, and was still the tallest in the world at that time. I dropped to the ground and lay as close to the edge of the pavement as I could without risk of being hit by car driving too close to the kerb. That seemed to do the trick; I couldn't fit every centimetre of the building in, but now I had what was obviously a shot of the whole building rather than one which seemed to begin a little way up.

That's an example of merely evening up the odds a little through vantage point. If I'd had a wider lens I wouldn't have needed to lie on the ground. An example of actually gaining advantage through vantage would be later still, when I concluded that it had to be possible to get a photo of the Taipei 101 with a plane from the nearby Taipei city airport visible somewhere near the building's spire. By this time, the Taipei 101 skyscraper had become my latest photographic obsession, and getting a shot or shots of an aircraft flying near the spire became an obsession within an obsession.

Songshan, Taipei's local city airport (which would later become a regional one) lies upon an area of flat land north of most of the city's urban heart and south of the mountains of the Yangmingshan National Park, and the Taipei 101 lies a few kilometres to the south-east of that. It stood to reason that there had to be vantage points somewhere in the foothills of the national park from which planes taking off from Songshan Airport would appear

in front of the skyscraper, perhaps even flying at around the same height as its spire. Ideally the vantage point would also be at around the same elevation as the spire, approximately 500 metres above sea-level.

But finding the right spot, at the same approximate elevation, took a very long time. Then, I had to make seven trips to that spot (and I didn't live anywhere nearby) before I got even one useful shot. Three times it rained by the time I arrived, and when it was dry the problem was usually pollution haze. The next problem was the distance. I decided I had no other choice than to fork out the cash for a budget 300mm telephoto, and this is what I did. I focused on the spire and waited for planes, but most didn't enter the frame, and whenever one did, it happened so fast I failed to capture anything useful. So I had to follow each plane taking off from the runway with the camera, every few minutes, and this was a very tiring and tiresome process because although the general flight path was the same, their precise trajectories varied and in fact most were either too high or too low, or completely out of the frame by the time they reached the area around the spire that my lens was eventually pointing at. Finally I did get a few useful shots, and an internet search revealed that there were very few similar shots around with a plane at around the height of the spire, and those circumstances prevailed until about five years later in 2018! So, with that, I felt quite pleased to have used vantage to my advantage.

But back to my trip from Hong Kong to Taiwan nearly 20 years earlier. This was long before the Taipei 101 was built, but not long after construction of the Shin Kong Life Tower had been completed. For many years, this 245-metre building close to Taipei's main railway station would hold the title of the Tallest Building in Taipei. I had read in Hong Kong that this building was to have an observatory open to the public, and that put it on my list of places to visit, partly just for the sake of seeing the city from up above, but mostly to get some aerial photos from it.

I felt things were falling into place when my girlfriend and wife-to-be, Kate, persuaded me to stay a further two days in Taipei, as she would have time off work then and we would thus be able to visit this new skyscraper and various other locations in Taipei that I wanted to photograph. My airline ticket was as cheap as it was only because of its tight restrictions: I couldn't change the date of return, and if I cancelled it I wouldn't get a refund. However, Kate assured me that I was now eligible for a number of discounted Singapore Airlines flights each year; and suggested I may as well take advantage of that by using the first one to return to Hong Kong. So I agreed, despite the fact that there were actually no seats available on any flight to Hong Kong for nearly a week. I would be put on a waiting list, she explained, and as people cancelled, as some always do, I would move up the list and finally have a seat.

## Rolling Thunder

Before ascending the skyscraper, there were a couple of other places I wanted to visit and photograph. The first was the previous tallest construction in Taipei, the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial, dedicated to the former Republic of China dictator of the same name. The park housing the memorial was later re-named Liberty Square or Liberty Plaza in recognition of the many victims of the miscarriages of justice that occurred during Taiwan's era of authoritarian rule, but at that time the entire area was still known as the CKS Memorial. Its main, west side entrance features a very large, ornate open gateway with a view directly to the main mausoleum building, which previous to the Shin Kong Life Tower's construction was Taipei's tallest construction at just 76 metres. It was built to be imposing, and bearing this in mind I dropped to my knees to see if the view could be made to look any more dramatic. It did look so, at least slightly.

I noticed Kate looking on with some concern and perhaps embarrassment. I took a couple of shots at this level, and then, just as I would with the Taipei 101 many years later, lay flat on the ground and took a couple more shots. These were the best and most dramatic. But as I rose, smiled and proclaimed my belief that I had just taken a couple of great-looking shots, I couldn't help but notice that my girlfriend was looking very agitated. I genuinely hadn't the slightest idea why. But she insisted that we leave the place immediately and we did, walking towards the next location, New Park, now renamed 2-28 Memorial Park, in memory of the victims of the February 28th, 1947 massacre.

"What was all that for", Kate asked me as soon as we had left the scene, "rolling around on the ground in front of everyone?"

"Rolling around on the ground? I was just taking a couple of low-angle photos!"



"So you ruined your clothes just to take a couple of photos? So embarrassing! I didn't know what to think, and with everybody looking at you!"

I found this hard to accept. I pointed out that my clothes hadn't even been dirtied, let alone ruined, and I didn't think anybody had batted an eyelid at me. She commented that she hoped I wouldn't repeat the show at New Park, and added that she hadn't seen anyone else acting the way I had. That seemed to be what concerned her most.

Bearing in mind that low-angle views were out, when we arrived at the park I pointed to some steps in front of a building facing onto the park and commented that they seemed like a good place to sit. I was pleased to see that my principle reason for visiting the park was there for me: an old mainland Chinese martial arts master who taught his classes in Praying Mantis kung fu there every morning. Although I had never spoken to this teacher before, I had once looked on while he taught a class, considered joining the class myself, and knew many people who had taken his classes and many more who knew about them. He was possibly the best-known martial arts teacher in Taiwan who didn't have his own practice hall.

The teacher, and his eight or nine students were not directly in front of us, but a little to our left. Kate was sitting to my right. I turned to focus on the old kung fu master, who was in the process of correcting a student's stance. I thought the scene was going to be worth several shots, but before I had managed to press the shutter on the first, my hands and the camera were forcefully pushed aside. The camera almost hit the concrete step we were sitting on. "What are you doing?" Kate asked me in a hushed but urgent tone. I felt she had put the weight of her entire body into pushing the camera away, and it took me a few moments to regain my composure.

I straightened myself and checked that my camera was still set to shoot. "I was trying to take a photo! It looks like I've missed it now!"

"You can't just take a photo of someone without their permission! You haven't asked that man if you can take a photo of him!"

I explained that I already knew from other people's stories that the martial arts master didn't mind, and in fact would probably welcome it, especially coming from a foreigner. Kate was adamant however that there was no way of knowing whether the man would object without asking him. I told her that neither the teacher nor any of his students had even noticed me, so what was the big deal?

"That's not the point. Secretly intruding on other people's privacy is even worse than openly intruding on their privacy!"

"Oh, come on! Nobody can expect privacy in a public park. If you want privacy, you stay in a private place."

We sat on the steps for a few more minutes in silence before Kate asked me whether or not I was going to go ahead and ask the martial arts master if I could take a photo of him. I told her no; that seemed ridiculous to me. And as there was consequently no reason to remain in the park we headed for the next 'port of call', the Taipei Museum of Fine Arts. This is a building at the northern end of central Taipei, just south of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel. Both these buildings, though very different, were constructed in the 1970s. The fine arts museum was built in what was at the time regarded as a futuristic style, and by contrast, the Yuanshan Grand Hotel, to its north, was built in a classical Chinese style. There was also the additional attraction of a much smaller building nearby now known as Taipei Story House. This building was constructed during the Japanese colonial rule era, but in a continental western European style. I was keen to get at least a few shots of all three. We parked the scooter a little way to the south of the arts museum, and walked towards it.

"Looks like the weather is changing", I commented along the way, wanting to keep our interactions neutral and unrelated to photography. The day had started sunny but was now becoming overcast and the air was cooler. Dark thunder clouds were also brewing in the distance to the north-east.

"That's alright", my girlfriend answered, "we'll be indoors anyway."

As Kate walked towards the museum entrance, I took a few paces backward, opening up the distance between myself and the museum building in order to get the entire building in the viewfinder, brought my trusty Minolta

out of my daypack, swiftly checked the settings and composition, and clicked the shutter. Disaster! I had thought that Kate, walking towards the entrance, would nicely add a human element and a relevant one at that, as it happened that no other people were in the viewfinder at that time. But right at the last moment she had stopped and turned to face me, probably just wondering what I was up to. When I saw her exaggerated expression in the photograph the next week I realised she had been in the process of turning her eyes heavenward in feigned bafflement at my behaviour.

But at the time, all I could see was that the shot had been ruined. I gave her a glance which I thought conveyed my frustration and growing anger, and walked a few paces to one side, having given up on the first angle. Now there were other people in the picture, both coming out the entrance and walking towards it. I didn't think that was a problem, but as I prepared to take the photo, I realised there was indeed a problem with it: a woman standing almost in the centre of the scene, hands on her hips, glaring at me. As I took the camera down from my eyes, Kate asked me: "Are we going to see the exhibition, or just spend all morning outside the museum taking photos?"

I felt my blood pressure rising, and was surely tempted to bellow an expletive-laden order at her to get out the way, but bringing all that was left of my self-control into play, I merely gave her an insistent look and made a hand gesture indicating that she move to one side; something like a traffic cop may do to instruct vehicles in one lane to keep the way open for vehicles coming from the opposite direction. To my surprise, she duly moved to one side, but when I raised the camera to my eyes once again and looked into the viewfinder, I could not believe what I saw.

A group of five people, three men and two women, had apparently taken it upon themselves to ruin my photo for no reason, standing right in the middle of the picture waving at me. What on Earth was wrong with these people, I asked myself? I consoled myself that at least Kate had not jumped between to insist that I ask the five of them if they wanted to be photographed, tried to stay calm and took the camera from my eyes once again. I was about to walk over and ask them what their problem was; had they never seen anyone trying to take a photo of a building before? But after just a couple of paces, I heard Kate exclaim: "Hi-iiiiii!"

I suddenly realised the people she was addressing were from the law firm I had worked at nearly two years previously, including the two attorneys I actually served as an English secretary. The tension that had been building in my body suddenly drained away. "Lawyer Huang, Lawyer Chen!" I exclaimed, referring to them in a formal manner I would normally never have used, being on first-name terms with them. "What are you guys doing here?"

There followed about ten minutes of banter about the main exhibition running at time, which all agreed had not been worth seeing, about my life and work in Hong Kong, about the current situation at the law firm and so on. Inwardly, I postponed my plans to photograph the museum and the other two buildings until after we had seen the art museum exhibitions. "Well, the permanent exhibits are probably still worth seeing", I finally said, intending the comment to serve as an indication of intent, and took a few steps towards the entrance.

Correctly assuming my intention to bring our meeting to a halt, the thickset bespectacled solicitor Jack Chen suddenly suggested that I take a few photos of us as a group. "We should record this meeting; don't know when we'll meet up again..."

I knew the kind of contrived images he had in mind; the group standing in front of the building, all smiles, with at least several of the obligatory 'victory' hand signs or thumbs ups, and I didn't really want to be taking them. I made to hand the camera to Jack Chen, but he insisted with a laugh I take a few first, as any photo he took may not work out at all. "You're the photographer!" he added, probably just assuming that I knew what I was doing from my actions when they first saw me.

I hesitated.

"Get a move on!" Kate urged as the group took form exactly as I had thought they would. Then she added in a confident tone that belied the gross exaggeration of her statements: "He's been taking photos of everything that moves all morning..." There were a few quiet laughs among the group. But it didn't end there.

"Planes in the sky, ants on the ground", she continued, "walking up to complete strangers to take their portraits without asking!" There was now more open laughter all round, and I found myself so flabbergasted that I was

literally struck speechless and unable to proceed with the photo or photos.

"Especially the girls, I bet!" chimed in Annie Chen, a slim solicitor in her late twenties. She often had an impish smile on her face, and it seemed to suit the circumstances precisely at this time.

"Yes, then he's rolling around on the ground beneath them!" Kate claimed, making a gesture of someone looking up, snapping away with a camera. By this time, all I could do was stare at my girlfriend, open-mouthed, camera dangling from my left hand. I could hardly believe what she was saying, but the implication was obvious as most females wore skirts in those days. More laughs all round, and now a good deal heartier. But I was now concerned that some people from my previous place of employment might take these ridiculous comments to have some truth in them.

"Ha, ha, very funny", I told Kate in an obviously unamused tone of voice. "I think I need to have a word with you later", I added. Kate made a wide-eyed expression, her mouth open in a rounded form that seemed to suggest an "Oooooo!" sound.

"Now you're in trouble!" Annie Chen exclaimed, then added: "You *have* been naughty, letting everybody know about Alix's secret hobby!" I continued to stare in disbelief.

"Get *on* with it!" Kate then urged again. I lifted the viewfinder to my eyes, and took a couple of shots, pasting a smile on my face while a quiet fury began brewing within me.

After parting company with the law firm people, I made my dissatisfaction with my girlfriend's comments clear. She brushed that off, and though tempted to pursue the matter further I decided not to. I didn't want to create 'a scene'. I welcomed the chance to view the art exhibition however, no matter how unremarkable its content, as it gave me an excuse to get Kate out of my sight, and at least to some small extent, out of my mind.

I vowed to visit all the same locations I had just visited again sometime, but by myself. It was obvious that my camera and my girlfriend were simply incompatible. The only question was whether I would have enough time on my current visit to Taipei.

The remainder of our day out went little better. Kate insisted on taking a meal in the museum's cafeteria before leaving. I pointed out that it would be cheaper to eat outside, almost anywhere outside, and hoped she would agree to that. Not because I really cared so much about the price, but because the darkening skies and sounds of thunder were very obvious even inside the museum. Rain seemed certain and I hoped to leave before it started, in order to finally get the shots I wanted of the museum building, Taipei Story House, and the Grand Hotel. I reminded myself of a photography book I had read in Shatin public library in which a German photographer had used pre-storm thunderclouds to add a dramatic quality to photo of a castle. I thought I could do something similar, but it was not to be. Kate insisted she didn't want to wait while we looked around for a place to eat on the street, and we took our late lunches at the museum cafeteria. By the time we came to leave it was raining so hard we just stood in the shelter of the museum entrance, waiting for it ease off.

We both seemed to be in a less combative mood and it crossed my mind that my girlfriend may actually be amenable to waiting until the rain stopped completely, so I could finally get the photos I wanted. I suggested as much.

"It might rain for hours", she pointed out. "Let's just wait until it's eased off a little, then run to the motorbike. I don't want to wait hours just to take some photos of buildings, of all things."

I cursed myself inwardly for having the naive optimism to think she may agree to waiting for the rain to stop. "What do you mean, *of all things?*" I asked, petulance hard to conceal. "There are photographers who specialise in architecture; they take photos of nothing but buildings!"

"How boring!" Kate exclaimed.

As things worked out, we did as Kate suggested, bought a couple of disposable rain-wear macs from a shop near the parked scooter and then rode north to the next port of call: The National Palace Museum. Constructed in 1965 and located two or three kilometres to the north of the art museum, the National Palace Museum is home to around 700,000 pieces of Chinese artifacts and artworks, most of which were moved from the Palace

Museum in Beijing's Forbidden City, as well as several other institutions in China when Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalists fled to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese Civil War.

Before we even got there, the rain stopped and the sun came out.

It was too late now to return to the art museum and I knew Kate would not agree to that anyway. But I felt that at last the opportunity for a good photo or two had presented itself. By the time we had parked the scooter and begun walking towards the museum building, I had just what I wanted for a photo of the place: brilliant sunshine and deep shade. And the remaining wetness from the downpour added a resplendence to everything. I vowed to ignore any comments from my girlfriend and make the most of the scene. This was when I thought I had my best shot of the day, with Kate out of the picture and almost no-one else in it.

Taking what I thought to be a couple of good shots of the National Palace Museum put me in a slightly better mood. I consoled myself that it wasn't always possible to take the photos you had in mind, even if you do get to the right place at the right time. And I wasn't too far off Galen Rowell's stated "one good shot in 50", I told myself. I would more than make up the difference the next time I visited Taipei, I told myself. I knew I would not be able to visit these same locations the next day as my ostensible purpose for even being in Taipei was to spend time with my girlfriend. And I had vowed to keep my camera and her separate.

For the remainder of that day, and all of the next, the camera did not see the light of day. On my last day in Taiwan we rode to the coastal city of Danshui (also written Tamsui), located about 20 kilometres to the north-west of Taipei, and also spent a couple of pleasant hours in a traditional tea house, chatting with two of Kate's former classmates. I made a point of avoiding even any mention of my camera, or photography, and that seemed to work well. However, as my relationship with my girlfriend was apparently deepening again and she was already making preliminary arrangements to visit me again in Hong Kong, I couldn't stop thinking about how I was going to reconcile the two, something I would inevitably have to do eventually. I certainly had no intention of giving up photography but could see that I would have an uphill battle on my hands educating Kate to accept it, at least to the point that no repeat performances of the previous day's events would be possible.

There was a more immediate cause for concern however: when Kate called the Singapore Airlines desk at the airport that evening to check the waiting list, very few people had cancelled, and the chances of me getting back to Hong Kong the next day were beginning to look slim. It was already quite late in the day when she called the check-in desk, and I pointed out that the chances of over 20 people cancelling in the space of just a few hours were not good. I had already prepared myself with a couple of discount international phone cards, an alternative to full-charge calls that were just becoming popular at the time, and I had phoned some of my students to cancel their classes. I wondered aloud whether I should call those students whose classes were arranged for the following day, before it became too late to call?

"Don't worry", Kate assured me. "I guarantee you'll be on the plane back to Hong Kong tomorrow morning."

It was only at the last minute, after we arrived at the airport and tried to check in that I knew how she could have been so sure.

The check-ins for the first flights of the day always struck me as a kind of 'organised chaos', as the airport transitioned from a near-empty hall to a hive of activity. Those few people who had spent the night sleeping in seats and on benches moved to make sure they were first in line when faced with the relatively sudden arrival of the first bus-loads of passengers from Taipei. Check-in staff tried to keep calm as two computers failed to load the relevant software and moved on to two alternative machines, the fast-growing line of waiting passengers following them. Kate was talking to a man in his 40s who appeared to be in overall charge. After a few moments, he walked over to me, and after introducing himself as the 'station manager', told me with a smile: "I understand you have to get back to Hong Kong today, so we've put you in the jump seat, if you don't mind?"

"The, er, jump seat...?" I had never even heard of the term. Kate hurriedly assured the station manager she was sure I'd love it, made some joke I didn't get, and ushered me away, handing me my boarding pass in the process. With very little time before take-off, we proceeded directly to the hand luggage X-ray check.

"But what's this jump seat?" I asked as soon as I had a chance.

Kate explained that it was a seat in the pilot's cabin. I had never even imagined passengers would be allowed to

sit in the cockpit.

We parted company just before the hand luggage check. Kate was always embarrassed by displays of affection, so our parting must have appeared as one between two people in a working relationship, except for her vow to stay with me in Hong Kong again as soon as she could arrange it.

### "A Scene Just for You"

The pilot, a slightly plump Chinese Singaporean in his late 30s greeted me as the air hostess who had ushered me into the cockpit showed me how to open up the fold-down jump seat. Seated to his left was the co-pilot, perhaps a decade or more younger. Both men were obviously Singaporean judging by their English, but after exchanging a few short sentences with them I kept my quiet, leaving them to concentrate on a task I knew required their full attention.

The plane took off on schedule and 30 minutes later we were cruising at altitude. I had just noticed the co-pilot was drinking a coffee and reading a newspaper, when the pilot stood up and stated: "Just need to nip to the loo..."

The sight of the pilot standing up and walking towards the cabin door, while this huge jet thousands of metres up in the air had only a coffee-drinking, paper-reading co-pilot - who wasn't even glancing outside - in control must have made me appear concerned, for the pilot, hand on the cabin door, turned to quip with a chuckle: "Don't look so alarmed! We're on autopilot right now."

But about half an hour later, just before the final descent on the approach to runway 13, the pilot turned off automatic navigation, and seemed to mentally brace himself for a difficult task. "Can't do *this* part on autopilot", he told me. Then, he said, as if the thought had just come to him, "Oh, by the way, there's a surprise for you today in the harbour!"

The co-pilot then added with a laugh, "Yes, especially for you, and only today; it will be gone by the next time you fly." Before the runway even came into sight, I knew exactly what they had meant, although by this time, I didn't dare distract the pilots by speaking. The China Airlines plane was actually still there in the water!

The plane approached Kai Tak on the same route I had first observed planes arriving from the west while sitting in the morning sunshine on my first leg of the MacLehose Trail hike. Gradually it began to lose altitude, coming closer and closer to the densely-packed buildings of Kowloon's urban heart, until it was possible to make out vehicles and even people.

I was almost mesmerised by the scene as the plane approached the runway; I had certainly never seen anything like it. The wraparound windows of the cockpit offered a view of the entire harbour and airport not possible from any other vantage point; it was indeed a unique vantage point which would have been almost impossible for any other photographer to replicate, although those were not the thoughts that passed in my mind at the time. The slightly downward trajectory of the aircraft added a feeling of irresistible and growing gravitational pull; something like being at the beginning of a downward section of a roller-coaster in slow motion. The aircraft's engines drowned out the sound of the city below, of course. But apart from that, it was quiet. Yet I could hear some exclamations coming from passengers somewhere behind the cockpit door. They had definitely seen it too! And there it was, ever-nearer, tail and rear fuselage still sticking out of the water. The scene was so absolutely remarkable, unique, and yet also alarming that I couldn't take my eyes off the plane and its place in the surrounding Victoria harbour; I was spellbound.

It was only when my own plane actually touched down on the runway that I realised I hadn't even taken my camera out of my bag, let alone taken what could have been a few shots of unparalleled uniqueness from the cockpit as the plane approached the runway, with that other very similar commercial airliner still half-submerged in the water beyond. It was the 'perfect' finish to several days of missed opportunities that had started at the same location; and the biggest missed opportunity of all! The vantage point I could have used to gain advantage had been handed to me a silver platter, and all I had done was stare open-mouthed at it until it was taken away!

## Mission Unaccomplished

Back in my Yuen Leng Village house a few days later, I had to admit that in terms of photography, my trip to Taipei had been an unmitigated disaster. It wasn't even as if I could console myself with Galen Rowell's one-good-shot-in-50 philosophy. I had used up several rolls of 36-exposure film and produced only two shots - those taken on the ground in front of the CKS Memorial - that I considered even worth keeping. And they were nothing special.

All the rest went in the bin. The biggest disappointment of all was my shot of the National Palace Museum, which I had originally surmised to be a success. At the time I took it, I had noticed a man walking from the entrance in my approximate direction. I had also noticed him taking something from his pocket, but at the moment I clicked the shutter his hand was closer to his groin than his pocket, and his posture was somewhat hunched. When I saw the photo I could hardly stop myself from cursing the man; he looked like a hunchback lewdly rubbing his groin while looking and walking towards the camera. "Why couldn't you stand up straight, you idiot, and put your hand *anywhere* else!" I found myself shouting at the photo before tearing it into little pieces.

Slowly, I calmed down, realising how ridiculous my reaction had been. The man of course knew nothing of how he had ruined an otherwise fine photo, and why should he have cared even if he had known?

I reflected that had I been working on the payroll of a travel magazine and come back with the photos I had, I would probably have been fired on the spot, or at least transferred to some other, less challenging position. I was almost embarrassed to have taken the photos I had, as some of them had been viewed by the couple who ran the shop I had bought the Minolta at; this was also where I got most of my films developed. Being a friendly and conversational couple with an interest in travelling to Taiwan, it had been difficult for me to avoid letting them peruse at least some of my photos, but I quickly explained that I hadn't really had a chance to take a single shot on this particular visit: "My girlfriend wouldn't let the camera out of her hands!" I claimed, well aware of the irony. "She hasn't got much of a talent for photography, but she's definitely keen enough! I hope on the next visit, I'll have a bit more time with the camera to myself!"

I began considering other convenient shops I could get my photos developed at in future to avoid any future suchlike embarrassments.

And yet even *this* did nothing to affect my new-found interest in photography. Remembering how things had been just a few months earlier, I had to chuckle to myself at the huge contradiction. I had virtually come full circle in my attitude both to taking photos and to living in Hong Kong generally, all as a consequence of having bought a camera.

So, to once again answer the question asked at the beginning of Chapter One: Yes, I believe a camera *can* change your life.

## The Traveller and The Travel Photographer

In the True Tales of a Traveller series, I've talked before about the differences and similarities between travellers and tourists, and the differences between travellers and immigrants. But what about the differences between a traveller and a travel (or outdoor) photographer?

There may be many, but it's more likely that there will be few.

It's certainly possible that a studio photographer could turn his or her hand to travel or outdoor photography (and almost all outdoor photography could also be regarded as travel photography) without getting too involved with all the inconveniences of travel. But unless they intend to specialise in only one location, which just happens to be right where they live, they are going to have to do at least *some* travel. Then they would become travellers, even if only on a small scale, and regular travellers too if they were professional. In fact, even specialising in just one location, it would still be hard to get away from the inconveniences of travel.

Let's go back to Hong Kong, and the huge range of 'photo opportunities' I discovered that this relatively small territory offered. All of these rich-in-potential locations could easily be reached within a day, although a few of

them may have been ideally photographed by staying overnight close to the destination, which would have put me exactly where I wanted to be when the sun came up and the outdoor photographer's golden hours of early morning sunshine began.

But in my own case I didn't even bother with this possibility, and visited everywhere I did go without staying overnight anywhere but my own home. But to do this, I had to have the extraordinary convenience of 24-hour transport services, such as the minibus services that covered everywhere in Hong Kong where there were roads, right around the clock. Even though I was located well towards the northern end of the territory, I could walk ten minutes in the early hours from the near total silence and pitch dark of my village house to the main north-south road between Tai Po and the PRC border, and without waiting too long, take a minibus right into the heart of urban Kowloon, in even less time than it generally took during the day.

This is how some of my longer and more distant hikes in Hong Kong began, such as the Lantau Trail, which was virtually at the other end of the territory from where I lived. And in some cases, that meant getting up as early as 3 am. Only so much can be said about the convenience of transportation services; there are not many people who savour the 'convenience' of getting up at three in the morning to catch that convenient minibus, regardless of the photographic potential it may offer. And this is often the first major stumbling block for many would-be travel photographers, and about as far as a great many potential travel or outdoor photographers will go in their travel photography endeavours.

So, even in a relatively small territory like Hong Kong, with excellent public transport and a generally warm climate, it's difficult to avoid some of the hardships of travel if you want to be a travel or outdoor photographer, even specialising only in your home territory. On some level, even without spending a single full night outside my own home, to take photos all over Hong Kong I had to be a traveller, albeit only a glorified day tripper who sometimes left home deep in the night and only returned home deep in the next night!

But it's more likely that a travel photographer will passionately embrace travel, rather than try to avoid or minimise it. After all, that's what travel photography is all about. Regardless of whether travel photography represents an income or not, most travel photographers will try to optimise both their travels and their travel photography to make the most of both, although how much emphasis is given to photography probably depends mostly on whether or not it's financially rewarding.

In my own case, with a few disappointing attempts at photography as an adolescent, an interest in photography came first in my life, then an interest in travel, much later. But neither of these interests really included 'travel photography' in any way at first.

For the kibbutz volunteers I knew and travelled with in Israel and the eastern Mediterranean region, travel photography was something almost at odds with what they were doing. Taking snaps of well-known places was just such a *touristy* thing to do, and they were often at pains to stress that they were *travellers*, not merely tourists. "Take a picture in your mind", said Willeke, a Dutch girl with whom I travelled along with several other kibbutz volunteers, when I lamented that I had forgotten to bring my camera with me on one of our trips. So I did, or at least tried.

But, needless to say, those pictures, if they could be thus termed, had already blurred considerably within a matter of weeks, let alone months or years. So, by the time I was travelling and working in India, two or three years later, I had already discarded that piece of advice and decided to take pictures with my camera instead. The only significant difference was that rather than walking around with a camera strapped around my neck at all times like all those camera-toting tourists who didn't seem to care how locals regarded them, mine stayed discreetly in my daypack until a scene worthy of recording presented itself.

So, I guess there are more than a few other travel photographers, who, like myself, were originally travellers, but later decided to incorporate photography into their travels.

Making photography a more central part of my travels gave those travels an added structure, significance, and purpose. That was something I didn't need when I first set off to see the world, and neither did most of my fellow travellers, who like myself were mostly in their late teens or early twenties. It was enough for us just to be travelling somewhere far from home. Just being where I was, when I was, with whom I was with, was more than enough to capture my attention 100% of the time; how would I have had the time for fiddling around with exposure settings?

## The Shock of the New

What I mean by the above words is that for me, for example, just taking a holiday in Morocco in 1981, my first independent overseas travel, subjected me to a barrage of new experiences and feelings, which left deep impressions on me. When I embarked on a 'working holiday' in Israel a few months later, that was even more the case. I can even remember the exact sentences spoken between myself and a Jewish Brit of my own age I encountered by chance at Heathrow airport, with whom I shared a couple of beers before boarding. He was also going on a 'kibbutz experience', albeit at the other end of the country from my kibbutz. And many more subsequent conversations I had with other volunteers on my kibbutz, I can still remember now, word for word, over 40 years later!

But after a few years of travelling and working in a variety of countries, there inevitably comes a time when there is less novelty to be found in any new country or region travelled. That's my subjective impression, but it seems to be shared widely among long-term travellers.

Less subjective is the 'globalisation' that was at first only talked about by politicians in the immediate post-Cold War years of the early 1990s. This gradually became a reality, making the world seem even smaller, while the territorial range of multinational companies became progressively larger as one former communist state after another welcomed the fast food franchises, the companies selling upmarket 'designer' clothing and accessories, and the giant news and entertainment media concerns of the capitalist world.

So, after a few years of travel for its own sake, there begin to be less surprises to be found anywhere a traveller can go, and certainly less surprises in terms of cultural values and lifestyle. This is even more the case today than during the Cold War era.

And regardless of the era, as the traveller covers progressively more territory, there also gradually become less and less genuinely and completely new places that the traveller can go. For sure, there will still be many new and exciting places to visit and much to discover; there are too many places on this Earth for anyone to travel thoroughly and comprehensively, even in a lifetime. But after a few years of travelling and working abroad, the days when just the routines of daily life, the typical diets, religious beliefs and so on could be eye-opening will have long gone.

For example, if a traveller has travelled extensively in India, there is no way that subsequent travel in Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, or Sri Lanka (all of which were once united as 'British India') could possibly seem to be dramatically different from what he or she had already become familiar with in India, even though there are enough differences in culture and lifestyle for all of the above-mentioned places to be separate and mutually independent countries.

So, once the excitement and novelty that was experienced when the intrepid adventurer first set off into terra incognita has mostly worn off, and the traveller has a pretty good idea of what to expect wherever he or she goes (it should be pointed out, however, that there are always *some* new and unexpected discoveries), then most travellers will start looking for something else to add to their travels or incorporate into them. Something inclusive of, but not limited to travel; something different from, but not incompatible with travel; something the traveller could perhaps even take as a potential new field of endeavour, one which may even come to supersede travel itself.

This 'something' certainly doesn't have to be photography; it can be almost anything. For some, it may be scuba diving or surfing; for others it may be mountain hiking or even mountaineering. There are also those who convert to a new religion on their travels, and then go on to spread the word as missionaries. For others it may be an interest in the language or languages of a country they fall in love with that come to take up the greater part of their time and energy, and perhaps even guide the direction of their careers.

For me, it was photography, only because I had already learnt something about the subject. It was easy for me to blend photography and travel.



### Chapter Three: The Way of The Gull

## The Birds

The sky was lightening and it was now light enough for me to see my way. I put my camera back in my daypack and was about to stand up when I noticed that the lone seagull which had been perched on the stone wall a few paces from my bench when I began my reveries was actually still there!

I slowly slipped back down onto the bench, and stared at the bird for some moments, wondering why it wasn't afraid? Didn't it realise that it was perched dangerously close to a human, the kind of creature that took potshots at birds with firearms just for sport? Why wasn't it afraid?

For a moment, as I gazed at this bird, I got carried away with the notion that perhaps it was I who should have been afraid. I remembered a film I had seen on TV as a boy, *The Birds*. This was a 1963 American horror-thriller film produced and directed by Alfred Hitchcock, and based on a book of the same name which focused on a series of sudden and unexplained violent bird attacks on people.

Eventually, I decided that the bird was not afraid simply because it felt it had no reason to be afraid. I tested my hypothesis by standing up and walking towards it, controlling my own fear at the same time and not allowing myself to look as if I had even noticed its existence. Only when I was almost within grasping distance of the large gull did it move away, making a few nonchalant flaps of its wings to take it a couple of metres further from me along the wall. I suddenly remembered that I had in fact noticed the same phenomenon in New Zealand, a country that takes its ecology and the protection of its bird species very seriously. The bird was somehow just aware that it had no reason to feel threatened by me, or any other humans.

"Well, let's make a move", I told my camera and the bird. "We've got a lot of ground to cover this morning, the three of us! This is The Way of the Gull, so would you like to be my guide?"

I then began walking down to the seafront to once again see the harbour where my father's catamaran had once been moored. I stopped close to that spot and was suddenly overwhelmed by a cascade of memories from over two decades earlier, even though there was nothing at all in the space it had once occupied. After buying the boat in Kent from a character he labelled a conman, and sailing it to Port St. Mary, my dad had spent considerable time in the harbour renovating it and making it 'seaworthy'. I had also helped him in this, before taking off on my overseas travels in 1981. I seemed to sense a whiff of paints and solvents as I gazed at the empty space for a few moments before moving on.

Ten minutes later I was on Clifton Road, walking south out of Port St. Mary. On my right were comfortable-looking detached and semi-detached houses with few signs of any life stirring within them, on my left just a dark rocky coast and a sea, which though still black when my mother had dropped me off, was now a kind of dirty grey-green colour. But the sky was absolutely cloud free. I knew that by the time I reached Port Erin, that sea would be blue.

"Looks like it's going to be a brilliant day!" I told myself, and no sooner had the words left my lips than a strong gust of wind hit me from the side.

To the south-west of both Port Erin and Port St. Mary lies a peninsula-like chunk of land whose interior and northern side, close to Port Erin, I was intimately familiar with. But the southern coastal strip along the coast, from Port St. Mary to The Sound, the southern tip of the island, was a section of the Raad Ny Foillan I hadn't walked for a very long time; longer in fact than I could remember, even when I tried. The Sound itself is home to a café we had visited many times as a family directly via the A31 Sound Road, and that café looks out on a narrow (about 700 metres) sea strait that separates the much larger Isle of Man from a small island called the Calf of Man (with an area of only about 2.5 square kilometres). I would traverse The Sound en route to Port Erin before heading up the west coast from Erin to a town called Peel, about 11 ks short of my final destination for that day.

Very soon I was on a path leaving the small town of Port St. Mary behind, passed the golf course on my right, with nothing much ahead of me but for a few scattered houses above Perwick Bay which marked the last signs of human settlement before the trail became completely barren and windswept. Looking back at the path in front

of me after looking out to sea for a few seconds, to my utter amazement I saw what I took to be the same large gull I had seen earlier, standing right in front of me, smack in the middle of the path and looking directly at me!

"So! You really do want to be my guide then?" I asked with a laugh as I approached. As I got closer however, I faltered in my step involuntarily, seeing the gull apparently determined to take a stand against the approaching human. I actually had to force myself forward, telling myself it was ridiculous for me, a human, to so much as blink at a stubborn bird unwilling to give way. Only when I was about two paces from the bird did it actually move, running a couple of steps before taking to the air, but only to fly as far away as the top of the stone wall to the right of the path, just a few metres further from me, much as had happened earlier. And this time, it did not give way.

I passed it by, walking as far to the left of the path as I could comfortably manage without seeming to be taking any special measures to accommodate the bird's stubborn nature. Instead I adopted an approach I had learnt in childhood when confronted with fierce-looking dogs that growled and barked at me, taking me to be encroaching on their territory. That approach was to look fearless, and I had tried and tested it countless times since. The same dogs that would turn and run if I roared at them as they charged me would probably have torn a boy like myself to pieces if it had been me who turned and ran.

But while my actions may have been bold, in truth the hair on the back of my neck was standing on end and my whole body was covered with goose pimples as I walked past the bird, keeping it in the corner of my eye as I did. I mentally prepared myself for the possibility of an aerial attack from behind, but thankfully it never came. I didn't want the bird to sense that I was concerned with wherever it may be, so I kept looking forward for 20 paces or more before I could no longer resist. I turned my head. It was gone! I turned my whole body and scanned the area I had just passed. No sign of it. "What a strange bird", I told myself, as I restarted on my march forward, but that comment was quickly followed with another: "Oh, no!"

Thirty or forty metres ahead of me, also mostly perched on the stone wall, were at least a dozen gulls! This time I really did stop in my tracks. What was I going to do now? This time I was seriously outnumbered, and if they were hostile I could get badly hurt! I couldn't just turn back at this point, could I?

Therein lay the answer: people hiked this trail every day, I told myself, especially now in the summer. I hadn't heard of any bird attacks or warnings to 'beware of the gulls!' I continued on my way, determined that if I was indeed attacked, I would run forward, not back. There was no turning back!

Again, I got quite close to the gulls by the time they actually took to the air, but not as close as I had been to the lone gull encountered just before. I then turned and noted that they were mostly quickly re-grouping on the wall. "They're all like that!" I told myself. They were simply not afraid of humans.

"And where's your spooky gull-guide now", I asked myself? "Which one is it?"

I shook my head at my own naivety. It hadn't even been the same bird I had encountered twice; I had just assumed it to be.

I then remembered that once, while sailing "the Cat" with my dad from Port St. Mary to Port Erin, he had pointed to shearwaters, cormorants, and other sea birds I couldn't remember the names of, and told me that the whole area was a "haven for birds".

"Haven?" I asked my deceased father in my imagination. "Heaven, more like it! Looks like these guys call the shots here; we humans are just guests!"

And indeed, I did spot numbers of several different species of bird en route to Erin, including some completely unknown to me.

## The Butterfly Effect

With Calf Sound, I guessed, perhaps still as far as an hour away, my mind turned back again to the person who had shortly before driven me to Port St. Mary so early in the morning, who was now living in a big empty house

on the other side of Port Erin: my mother.

Slowly, I realised that in some strange, roundabout way, I was in large part responsible for the fact that the Isle of Man had become the family home, and that as a consequence my mother lived where she now did. That realisation, though swift to hit me, took several minutes to completely run its course and actually made me stop walking on several occasions, once or twice verbally confirming the veracity of my memories before going on. How had such facts escaped my notice over not merely many years, but even decades? It seemed incredible.

It decided it was as good a time as any to consume my frugal breakfast and chew over these memories while also biting on my apple. The sun was now shining directly on the land, so I picked a grassy spot to sit down on and took the rising sunshine full on.

Apparently, my memory was not deceiving me.

By the time I was ten or eleven years old, we had already travelled as a family to many locations in the British Isles. These holiday trips included short weekend excursions to the Lake District where we stayed overnight in our caravan, and it was there on a warm July afternoon that I had my first independent hike, and found I liked it, a lot more than family walks or even than the enforced 'Five Mile Hike' that I had taken from Winter Hill, north of Warrington as a boy scout a year or two earlier. Apart from the exercise and natural surroundings, what I liked about solo hikes was that they gave me a chance to think things over, as I was doing now.

Our family holidays and excursions included trips to see - and often stay with - relatives in Perth and in Ayre, Scotland, and in London, as well as numerous one-day trips from our family home in Warrington down to Gloucester, and one trip to Eire I was too small to remember well. Both my parents came from relatively large families, collectively referred to as "the tribe" by my father, and in addition there were friends of our family in various locations, as we had moved home several times for the convenience of my dad's work as an engineer. So there were plenty of people to visit!

And then there were also holidays in places where we didn't have friends or relatives, such as one spent in Pembrokeshire, South Wales, and another in Hunstanton on the other side of the country in Norfolk. And that wasn't even counting "the continent".

When I was around five or six years old, we went on holiday to Spain's Costa Brava, a place just beginning to enjoy a tourism boom which would make it probably the most popular overseas destination for British holiday makers a few years later, and three or four years after that holiday, we even went on holiday to Yugoslavia, which made me the only student in my class who had been to this communist country. On both these overseas trips, my dad had driven us to our destinations. Staying at hotels and caravan parks along the way were holidays in themselves and this mode of travel definitely allowed us to get a bigger and more complete picture of life in continental Europe.

So, we had been around a bit by the time I was 10 or 11 years old. But the Isle of Man? It wasn't even on our radar as a place to visit. For me, it was just some island smack in the middle of the Irish Sea I had seen so many times on maps. I could not remember it ever even being mentioned by anyone in my family before I was perhaps 11 years old, even though my maternal grandfather had lived there, and we still had relatives there too.

The catalyst of change in that respect I was able to trace back to one Sunday afternoon when a couple of my older brother's friends, a year or two older than him, dropped in at our home to say hello. The previous time I had seen one of them, he had been riding a bicycle, but this time the two of them were on motorbikes and dressed in leathers.

After 20 minutes or so of motorbike-related chat with my brother (which I eavesdropped on) and cups of tea, the two of them left. The throaty sound of the BSA Starfire's 250cc 4-stroke engine, the second bike to fire up and ride away, made a deep impression on me. "Wow!" I exclaimed in awe as the two riders hit the road, "I want one of them when I'm old enough to ride a motorbike!"

When would that be, was the next question in my mind? At the time, a 16-year-old could ride a motorcycle up to 250cc (which included the Starfire) with an 'L-plate' attached. That may have been only a few years away, but for someone my age, I knew that would seem like an eternity. How was I possibly going to wait *that* long?

Within a matter of months, *Motorcycle News*, a weekly motorcycle newspaper, had become an integral part of my life, as well as *Motorcycle Mechanics*, a monthly magazine.

The Isle of Man featured big in *Motorcycle News*. According to what I read, there were at least four motorcycle racing events held on the island every year, and two of them were motorbike extravaganzas that lasted a fortnight each!

They were, in inverse order of importance, first, Jurby Circuit races, which could be anything between one and several amateur races held at Jurby, an area of low-lying land some way to the north of my destination that day, Kirk Michael. It was home to a former RAF airstrip from which the circuit had been created. This was the island's only 'purpose-built' circuit, a race track along the same lines as Brands Hatch or Silverstone in England; the other events were held on regular roads, closed to traffic only for the duration of the races.

Then came the Southern 100. This was (and is) a race which starts and finishes in Castletown, in the south of the island, held along closed roads known collectively as the Billown Circuit. Despite my parents later taking up residency in the south of the Isle of Man I was a spectator at this race only once; it was the other two race events that captured my imagination more.

Those two events were the Manx Grand Prix and the Isle of Man Tourist Trophy Races, better known simply as the 'TT'. Both were (and are) held along a 60.7 kilometre (37.7 mile) course which has its start and finish line at a grandstand on Glencrutchery Road, Douglas, the island's main town (actually capital city, though the population is only around 26,000, and the entire island's population less than 80,000 at the time). Often called the 'Mountain Circuit' or the 'Snaefell Mountain Circuit' because it takes in a part of the island's highest mountain, Snaefell (422 metres above sea level is the highest point on the road; Mt. Snaefell itself rises to 621 metres above sea level). This course covers a large part of the island, which helps to make the event island-wide.

The Manx Grand Prix, being an amateur race which only attracted riders from the British Isles did not have the allure of the TT, then considered not merely the premier motorcycle racing event in the Isle of Man, but the premier motorcycle racing event in the world. But it certainly had enough allure to push me into suggesting, in 1971, that we take our summer holidays in the Isle of Man that year. A large new leisure centre called Summerland had also opened on the beach front promenade of Douglas, and this had featured in several regional TV news items. This also seemed like a great place to see as it boasted "everything from an ice rink to a go-kart race track", I pointed out, though in truth I cared very little about the leisure centre one way or the other. But it probably helped convince my parents that the island would be as good a place as any to visit that year, though my elder siblings didn't come with my parents and I, only my younger sister.

The races are usually held in the last week of August, which constitutes a 'practice week', and the first week in September, when the actual races are held. This meant I would be going back to school a week later than other students, and that certainly suited me fine.

We stayed at a hotel on Douglas Promenade call The Empress, and the whole thing was a huge adventure for me. I had never seen so many motorcycles in one place in my life. There were motorcyclists everywhere, most had travelled to the island by ferry from Liverpool (at that time there was still no Heysham ferry), but many had also come from Scotland, Ulster and Eire. Everywhere photographic film was developed, such as chemists (pharmacies) and camera shops, had a section given over to racks of photos taken by both amateur and professional photographers, which had been put up for sale. I spent a lot of time perusing these, sometimes too long for the patience of my parents.

We saw the races from a number of locations, but mostly from the grandstand in Douglas, from Bray Hill, a downhill section immediately after the grandstand area, where the bikes power downwards at incredible speeds, and Quarterbridge, a right turn in the circuit right after Bray Hill.

On days when there were no races, we visited various locations around the island. These included Laxey, a village north of Douglas, and home to the Laxey Wheel, a waterwheel built in 1854, which claims to be the largest working waterwheel in the world, Ramsey, the second-largest Manx town at the time located further up the east coast, and Mt. Snaefell, which we travelled to by the Snaefell Mountain Railway, an electric mountain railway connecting Laxey with the Snaefell mountain summit. Perhaps the non-motorcycle-related thing that made the biggest impression on me on this holiday was the view from this mountain's summit: England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales were all visible. This fit in so well with the island's 'Three Legs of Man' flag, and its

accompanying bold assertion that 'Wherever you throw it, it shall stand'. As a Scottish-born non-Scot, I liked the concept of separation from the rest of the British Isles and all the mutual animosities that existed between the regions making up the rest of the UK, and between the UK and Ireland. This was also the height of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland, and not long before the Bogside Massacre.

The only disappointment of the entire holiday were my photographs, taken with a Kodak Instamatic, perhaps the first film 'point and shoot' camera, which used easy-to-load 126 film cartridges. When the first batch, taken at the grandstand and on Bray Hill had been developed, I was truly dismayed although I didn't say much to reveal that. Every one of the photos looked like an urban landscape, or 'cityscape', with tiny images of motorcycles visible, most for no obvious reason!

The Instamatic was fine for portraits and family photos, and I had already taken quite a few satisfactory shots with the camera since obtaining it through collecting enough labels of a certain canned food I didn't particularly like but persuaded my mum to buy nonetheless in order to qualify of the food company's camera offer. But for motorcycle races, which I already considered far more important, it fell a long way short. Of course, I knew what telephoto lenses were, they were to be seen aplenty attached to the cameras of press photographers and other professionals at the races, but I also knew they couldn't be fixed onto a simple camera like mine, so I didn't know how to solve this problem.

I wanted to take photos like the ones I regularly saw in *Motorcycle News* where the bikes and riders took up almost the entire frame, or at least photos comparable to those I saw on sale everywhere in Douglas, not photos of roads and their surroundings! I had even imagined showing off such photos to my friends after returning to England, and until I actually saw the results of my shots, I had thought that I had been taking photos like that. Now the only way I could imagine showing off such photos to my friends would be if I could persuade my parents to buy some of the photos on sale in shops that had been taken at the same locations we had watched the races, and then pretend that I had taken them! And this is what I did, thereby convincing my former junior school classmate, Michael Dodd, that these Isle of Man races were something he definitely had to see!

The next June, Michael was with us when we stayed at a hotel in Ramsey I can't remember the name of, close to the town's Mooragh Park where (on non-race days) we spent some time sunbathing and sailing canoes on the large (12 acre) lake the park is home to. This time the event was the TT, and it blew away even the Manx Grand Prix.

Thousands and thousands of motorcyclists descended upon the island for this event, which like the Manx Grand Prix was separated into a 'practice week' and a 'race week'. They came from not only all over the British Isles but even from places as far away as Austria and Italy. The TT was not merely a race event like one at a purpose-built race track, but an experience. This extent to which this was the case could be seen from the packed cinemas showing George Formby's *No Limit* every night for two weeks. This film, which told the story of a bungling but likable character from the industrial north of England, and his determination to win a TT race on his self-built bike, was first released in 1935, so it was pretty old and scratchy even then, but who cared? It was entertaining, and it was about the Isle of Man TT Races. Noting French and German-speaking people who had been among the audience when we left the cinema after seeing this film, I reflected that despite being an ancient film of less than perfect quality, the humour was easily appreciated even by people who may not have been fluent in English.

We saw the races from several locations around the island, including the Douglas grandstand, and a place called Greg-na-baa, a location shortly before the riders reach Douglas - made even more popular by the presence of a pub and restaurant - but mostly from a hairpin corner (a very acute turn, so named because of the resemblance, seen aerially, to a hairpin) close to Ramsey known as the Ramsey Hairpin. This gave me the chance to get about as close to competitors as possible short of actually running out into the road with my Kodak Instamatic, but the results were still disappointing.

Other things about the races more than made up for that disappointment. In the riders' paddocks by the grandstand, I was able to see some faces that had already become familiar through *Motorcycle News*, and I even got to talk to one of them (Peter Williams, of Team Norton). Being so close to these major international racing stars was like a dream come true.

At the time, the TT Races were a part of the international motorcycle grand prix championship series held at various locations around the world - but mostly in Europe - and the Senior (500cc) TT race was the major event

of race week. Two-stroke Japanese motorcycles were beginning to constitute the majority of bikes entered in motorcycle races anywhere, but at that point the grand prix senior and junior (350cc) were still dominated by a small specialist high-end Italian company called MV Augusta, whose team was led by a legendary Italian rider named Giacomo Agostini, winner of nearly a dozen world championship titles at that time, and nine TT races.

On the last day of race week, however, Agostini's teammate, Gilberto Parlotti, crashed and was killed on his second lap. Thereafter, Agostini vowed he would never return to race in the Isle of Man, and many other well-known riders echoed his criticism of the course being too dangerous and joined him in his TT boycott. A few years later, the Isle of Man was dropped from the grand prix world championship series and replaced with Silverstone in England. The boycott of famous riders dealt a serious blow to the TT races, but hardly a dent to its place as the 'world's biggest motorcycle racing experience'. And the following June, we were back again, this time staying in Port Erin.

I sighed, stood, and continued on my hike, my simple breakfast finished.

So it was true. In a bizarre and peculiar way I was at least partly responsible for the fact that my mother now lived alone in that big, empty house.

I had only wanted to satiate my interest in motorbikes and motorcycle racing, but after two or three longish holidays on the island, a Manx connection had become solidified. By the time of our 1973 visit, we were no longer staying at hotels. Instead, my dad rented an unused flat for us above Cubbon's, the butcher's shop on Port Erin promenade. And the seeds for Port Erin becoming the family home were thereby sown, because we all agreed that we liked Port Erin and Port St. Mary more than Douglas or Ramsey.

The trail continued, hugging the almost treeless south coast of the island. I saw no other sign of human life at this still very early hour; only birds and sheep, and lots of both.

### The Accidental Time Traveller

My mind continued to slip back from the present to the past, even when I tried to focus only on the here and now. I realised, for example, to what a great extent small events can have on our progression from the present to the future.

Just as seeing my brother's friend ride off on his motorcycle that day had been the catalyst for my interest in motorbikes, which had played such a crucial role in making the Isle of Man my family's repeatedly chosen holiday destination, and eventually my dad's chosen retirement destination, that first visit to the island had sown the seeds for my later life as a travelling jack of all trades, with no formal qualifications.

After returning to Warrington and starting my new school year at Penketh High School one week late, for reasons I can no longer remember but beyond my control I also arrived 10 minutes late for my first class in the subject Arts & Crafts. My new teacher, a Mr. Shultz, took an instant dislike to me and reprimanded me for my lackadaisical attitude. In the first term exam, he gave me a very lowly score; 28th out of a class of 31. Up until that point, this had been my best subject, but now it became my worst. This made me realise how arbitrary high school examination results can be. My actual work was no worse than it had been before, but the teacher simply didn't like me. Under such circumstances, what was the point in trying, I asked myself? I resolved that I wouldn't bother. I knew at that point that I would not be following my elder siblings into further education. I would stay at Penketh High School not a moment longer than the law forced me to.

But the biggest blast from the past came when I saw a sign for 'Spanish Head and The Chasms'. That brought me to a halt and left me open mouthed. Spanish Head! The Chasms! Now I remembered when I had last hiked this section of the Raad Ny Foillan. "Nearly 30 years ago!" I exclaimed. Somehow, in all the many visits to the Calf Sound café so close by over the years, no mention of these locations had been made to me, nor had they ever come back to mind for any other reason.

That hike had been during the very holiday we had stayed in the flat above the butcher's in Port Erin for the first time. The hike could not really have been called a hike in the same sense as my later solo hikes, such as the one I was now on, but more of a leisurely ramble that took a good part of the day just to complete a loop from

Port Erin's promenade to Port St. Mary and then on to The Chasms and back to Erin. We had walked along the same route I just hiked but at a fraction of the speed, stopped for photos at Spanish Head, but then cut across the interior of the peninsula-like chunk of land south of Erin and Port St. Mary, passing The Chasms along the way, near which we took lunch, and a village called Gregneash, which I had seen many times since.

Gregneash is now described as by the Manx Heritage charity (which takes care of the site) as a "living museum" dedicated to the preservation of the traditional Manx ways of life. In 1973, it struck us a little rustic, but nothing more than that and in no way remarkable.

"Time changes everything", I told myself. It was one of my dad's favourite sayings.

But what about Spanish Head and The Chasms? Spanish Head is a promontory not far from The Sound, with a nearly sheer drop of over 100 metres to the sea, and The Chasms, which lie nearby, are a phenomenon of geological interest, like a number of deep gashes in the land close to the sea which apparently are further eroding an area of land and pushing it from the main body of land.

I remembered that our walk had passed The Chasms that sunny day and had to smile at the memory of having to 'jump' across one of the chasms, which lay directly across the footpath we were taking. I was sure The Chasms would now seem like a few dinky little cuts in the ground.

You see, I had done this kind of time travelling before. On one occasion, for example, I had ridden my first motorcycle at the age of 17 back to Culcheth, a village north of Warrington where I had attended junior school. I had stopped the bike by the side of the road next to the school and looked on almost incredulously. "Is this it?" I asked myself in disbelief. For six or seven years I had carried memories of the place with me the same with respect to dimensions, but not scale. It now seemed so tiny!

And then a few years later, while living in London for the first time, I had dropped in on the flat of relatives I had first visited at the age of 10 or 11. Same thing! What had seemed like a spacious apartment to me as a boy now seemed so small, even a little cramped.

I expected a similar experience with The Chasms. I was in for a shock.

Just a couple of hundred metres from Spanish Head, I had my first, and least significant accident of the day.

Apparently simultaneously, a sudden gust of wind hit me from behind, and my right foot slipped on a piece of loose rock. My right knee hit the ground and my right hand, outstretched to break the fall, was slightly grazed after making contact with the rough ground. But overall, it seemed like nothing to be concerned about. I sat by the path and rubbed my knee a little; it soon felt OK.

Since leaving Port St. Mary, where the air had been quite still, a breeze had picked up and grown steadily stronger the closer I got to Spanish Head. This seemed natural as the entire area was more exposed, but within that there had also been a number of sudden gusts, some of them quite strong. I wondered if it was something about the topology of the coast that caused these?

I decided to replay the route of 29 years ago, at least a little way. I would not go on to Gregneash, but I was making good time, and had enough to spare to take a look at The Chasms.

But with no forethought on the matter, I stopped about five paces short of the spot at Spanish Head where we had taken photos in 1973. Somehow, my body was unwilling to go any closer. But it wasn't any big deal; I wasn't in any kind of battle with my body, to force it to the edge. I just stood there for a few moments, and the memory of the previous visit came back.

First, walking a little way away from the cliff to bring in the backdrop of the kind of place they were standing, which wasn't difficult with the Instamatic, I took a couple of shots of my parents and younger sister. Then, my dad swapped places with me, and he took a couple of shots. For the second one, I stepped back a little and stood on tiptoes behind and to the side of my mother. I wasn't actually any taller than her, but I knew the principle of taller people standing further back in group photos, and wanted to pretend that I was!

"Don't get too near the edge", my dad had quipped. "I don't want to be going back to England without you!"



If the fall before reaching Spanish Head had unnerved me, it was nothing to the effect The Chasms had on me. At some point I reached a turnstile with a sign for The Chasms warning "Danger of Falling".

"Already done that!" I quipped and continued into an area walled off from more stable land. When I saw the first of these chasms I was truly taken aback by its size: much wider than I had imagined. I didn't dare get too close except by kneeling down some way from the sheer drop, then lying down and edging a little closer. It seemed to go all the way down to the sea!

The entire area was covered in grass and shrubs and it was not always easy to determine exactly where a chasm began. I spent no longer lingering there than necessary and was glad to get away from the place, noting an abandoned café which I felt had to be the place we had taken lunch 29 years previously.

There were also a few other relatively steep spots on the trail after I left The Chasms, but nothing so remarkable and certainly nothing particularly dangerous. However, Spanish Head and The Chasms had left me feeling somewhat unnerved. Anybody looking on would probably have found my over-cautious actions amusing, but there were still no people around at this early hour.

I was glad to see the Calf Sound café, which was the only building there at the end of the Calf Sound road. Glad because I knew most of the remaining trail from there to Port Erin, not glad because I fancied something to eat. At that time this was a simple white building, without the panoramic windows it now has, and its offerings were typical British food, not the elaborate and expensive cuisine served there today. There were a couple of cars already at the car park, but no sign of the owners, and the café itself was not yet open. Having already had my simple 'hiker's breakfast', I didn't linger.

But the memories did. And so did a question I didn't really want to deal with: did I have a moral responsibility to return to the Isle of Man to live; to look after my mother in her old age? And why had I never even realised that my parents had apparently hoped I would eventually move to the island to live at least nearby if not in the same house? It was only natural for them to think I would want to. After all, it was the adolescent me who had claimed on a number of occasions on those early holidays that when I left home it would be to live in the Isle of Man.

I consoled myself that I was just a kid; who would take the things I had said seriously?

You, of All People!

But then I remembered a visit to the island I had made in the summer of 1987. It was the first I had made in two years. I wouldn't make another visit until two years later, in 1989 (and that occasion was partly just because it fit nicely into my schedule on my first 'round-the-world' ticket). After that I would stay away for a full five years.

On my first full day in the island, I hadn't really felt like going anywhere. Rather, I just wanted to recover from my jet-lag. But my dad had other ideas.

Shortly after breakfast, my dad told me, in a tone of voice that carried a hint of his own enthusiasm: "The Southern 100's on today. We can drive down to Castletown later and watch it from there..."

"Oh...I think I'll give that a miss", was my response.

"Well, why's that? I was guessing you haven't seen any races for a long time, unless you have them in Taiwan?"

I shrugged. "No special reason. Just not particularly interested, I suppose".

"Not particularly interested?" My dad's tone of voice was incredulous. He then repeated the words, adding "You, of all people, not particularly interested!" I noted his look of slight bafflement as well as disbelief. "You're pulling my leg, surely?"

"No, it's a long time since I had much interest in bikes. I ride a scooter in Taiwan, but that's just for convenience".

I could see from the change in his expression that he now realised I wasn't joking. After a pause, he asked me: "Well, if you're not interested in motorbikes anymore, what *are* you interested in?"

"Girls!" my elder sister, Janet, interjected. She was also visiting.

"Travel", I corrected. "I guess that's my main interest these days".

"I see", my dad said after a long pause. I thought I could sense some degree of disappointment.

"But we can go down to Castletown later and watch the Southern 100 anyway", I suggested.

"Well, you don't have to watch the races for my sake; you don't have to humour your old man, you know!"

"No, like you say, it's been a long time, so I wouldn't mind seeing a race or two again. Anyway, it would probably be a good idea to get out and about to get over the jet-lag instead of just falling asleep all the time..."

And that was probably the only time I ever did anything, albeit a bit reluctantly, to meet the expectations of my father.

But, I had to ask myself as the town which had become the family home came into view, had he had other expectations of me? Had he really thought that some day I would move over - or "back" as he always put it - to the Isle of Man?

I had never even considered it as a serious possibility, although now the thought crossed my mind, I realised he had made it clear on many occasions that I could always stay in Port Erin while looking for work on the island, if I wanted to.

That, however, I knew would entail getting a work permit.

Many people unfamiliar with the Isle of Man, including even many other western Europeans, mistakenly believe the island to be a part of the UK.

In fact, along with Guernsey and Jersey, the Isle of Man is a crown dependency; a part of Britain (but not the UK), yet essentially self-governing. These are British possessions that have the status of 'territories for which the United Kingdom is responsible'. Not sovereign states, they don't have foreign ministries and are not member states of the Commonwealth of Nations. But as far as most areas of administration, outside international relations and national defence are concerned, they are autonomous. Thus, a UK citizen like myself would not have any automatic right to take up work on this island; a work permit had to be applied for.

One reason I was moving back to the UK after about 17 years since I had last lived there (in London), was that I wanted to give it one last try. My first attempt at re-integration, after only about 15 months abroad had been a disaster, and it lasted little more than a couple of months (related in the stories *The Long Way Home* and *Alternative Medicine*). My second attempt, in 1983/4 had been more successful, and that was a period I enjoyed. But eventually it unraveled, after I discovered travel on the Indian sub-continent (related in *Culture Shock*). Now, I was ready to make one last try.

Another reason I was moving back to the UK was that I felt I had had enough of going through the process of applying for work permits, or residency permits. The reason I had moved from Taiwan to Hong Kong in the first place was due to a purge of undocumented foreign workers in Taiwan in 1992, while as a British citizen I still had the automatic right to work and live in Hong Kong prior to 1997. I discounted the idea of applying for the right to live and work in the Isle of Man outright: I didn't want anything more to do with convincing officialdom that I should be allowed to live and work where I wanted.

I resolved that I would continue with my original plan, to first try to re-adapt to life in the UK before further considering any possibility of moving to the Isle of Man.

Avoid Temptation Unless You Can't Resist It

I noted that it was nearly half past eight as I walked down onto Port Erin's expansive sandy beach. I expected the remaining stretch to Kirk Michael to take me most of the day, despite my early start. Setting my sights on Kirk Michael may have been a bridge too far I told myself, but I was at least going to do everything in my power to reach it.

As I had predicted, the sea was blue, or at least nearly blue, by this time. Yet even now, it was still early. A jet-skier was putting out to sea, two small children were paddling noisily at the shallow water's edge while their mother looked on, and a couple of dog walkers were to be seen here and there; still not many people around considering the perfect weather.

As I passed the white seaside café building and disused lighthouse, and returned to the road at the other end of the beach I reflected that I may still have most of the trail to Peel to myself. Not that I disliked meeting other people on my Manx hikes; on the contrary, I found local people, whether native-born Manx or people who had settled there from elsewhere, to be very friendly, sociable, and easy to strike up a conversation with. But I also liked turning things over in my mind on my solo hikes too, so I didn't mind the idea of having the trail to myself either.

After walking the length of the beach and returning to the main road north out of Port Erin, however, I did notice a couple of figures out on the headland north of Port Erin where the Raad Ny Foillan ran. They didn't seem to be carrying anything, so I guessed they lived nearby and didn't think anything more of it until I met them. And then could hardly think of anything else.

This section of the trail was my favourite for many reasons. Firstly, being literally right on the doorstep of my parent's house, it was the most convenient. I had hiked out through Bradda Glen to Bradda Head scores of times over the nearly two and a half decades that my parents had lived in Port Erin. The views from Bradda Head over the south of the island were hard to beat anywhere I had hiked in my life. And the same applied to the views from Bradda Head across the Irish Sea to the Mountain of Mourne in Ireland and almost all points north on the west coast as far as Peel.

After continuing on the coast road as it climbs north from the centre of Port Erin, a stone archway to the left marks the continuation of the Raad Ny Foillan through Bradda Glen and towards the promontory of Bradda Head. Walking through the arch and into the glen, I would be mentally presented with a series of temptations. The first was a short path forking off to the left and down to the sea, an idyllic location with a wooden bench on which I had sat reading for many hours on many previous summer visits to my parent's home. It seemed like a great place to take the weight of my feet for half an hour or so...perhaps even doze in the quickly warming morning sunshine. I did consider this possibility and even went so far as to stop at the beginning of this little path and spend a few moments gazing at this sheltered little path, now bathed in sunshine. "You don't have time for that!" I finally told myself, and went on.

The second temptation followed hard on the heels of the first, and was more alluring still: simply quit at this point and head to my parent's home, now only a few minutes' walk away. "Why not just call it a day here, and do the rest of the hike tomorrow?" I asked myself, adding that I could start out at the crack of dawn again, and so be guaranteed to reach Kirk Michael the same day, perhaps even Jurby. An accompanying image appeared fleetingly in my mind - reading the morning paper, *The Guardian*, which my mum would probably have bought in "the village" by now, a cup of hot tea or coffee in my hand.

But I was also only very close to where my dad's ashes had been scattered and I stopped once again and stared in the direction I knew his ashes to have been. Memories of him as a younger man came to rescue my hiking plans. Later in life, he mellowed considerably, but in middle age he ruled with an iron fist. Adopting his typical tone of voice at that time, I told myself: "It doesn't matter whether you not you *want* to hike to Kirk Michael; your opinion doesn't come into it. You're going to hike there whether you want to or not!" I was mimicking him in my mind, yet it was almost as if I heard him, just a few paces away from me. I laughed inwardly at the false memory; it was a sentence he had never said in his entire life, yet he had said many others very much like it. Regardless of the fact that it was only me who had attributed the sentence to him, it was enough to make me continue walking again.

Coming out of Bradda Glen, the Way of The Gull hugs the southern side of the headland to the north of Port Erin

Bay, and hikers very quickly leave behind the sheltered glen and the nearby houses, as well as trees and tall bushes and find themselves on a much more windswept slope leading to a strange, gothic-style tower which stands atop the headland. At one point, there's a fork in the trail, leading more steeply up to a stone wall demarcating the end of grazing land both higher up and where I was standing. The original trail also continued at about the same level to a point just a minute or two further along where the hiker was presented with a further choice: a second, rough path also leading up to the tower, or one leading down to the remains of some disused lead mines close to sea level.

I stopped to take a couple of photos at this point, one in the direction of the tower, the other in the direction of Port Erin itself. I was struck by the fact that I had hiked this route many, many times and never even thought to take a camera with me. Yet now I felt the need to make some photographic records, as if some inner voice was telling me I may never have another chance.

The only other occasion on which I could remember taking photos had been over 20 years previously, shortly after my parents had moved to the island, when I took my clunky Zenith-E with me on some preliminary explorations of the area. On that occasion, and no more than three or four times thereafter, I had walked down the slope to the disused mines that remained there, not even knowing at first what they were the remains of. Those disused mines, I later discovered, dated far, far back; to at least the 1650s, and they stayed in operation until about 1874, by which time the shafts had been sunk far below sea-level. I walked down the slope towards them and took another shot of the headland, looking out to sea. I was momentarily gripped by another temptation: to use up perhaps half a dozen shots on the disused mines. After all, they were pretty unique if only on account of having such a long history. Memories of my first photo obsession, of Hong Kong's abandoned villages, came back to me. But I resisted this temptation, telling myself that would be just as indulgent as my ghost village episode. I didn't want to waste time, when I knew I still had a long hike ahead, and I didn't want to waste film either. Plus, I seemed to remember seeing a sign down there warning of the danger of falling into the mine. "Well, that decides it then!" I told myself, aloud. "Better not go anywhere near there", I cautioned with a laugh, adding mentally, "You wimp!"

But the fourth, and final temptation of the morning blew the other three away.

As I continued on my way up to the top of Bradda Head, some 116 metres above the sea, I heard voices and some light-hearted laughter, along with - clearly - the words "No, don't!" voiced by a female. There was nobody else in sight; the voices had to be coming from inside the tower.

The tower itself is what is known as a 'folly'; an ornamental building with no practical purpose. It was built in 1871 as a view tower in memory of William Milner, a local philanthropist, and is generally just called Milner's Tower. Inside it, a narrow stairwell spirals up past moist, dim chambers to an airy roofless top floor with a high wall. The tower looks like the kind of place you may expect a fairy-tale princess to be kept captive. And I was to find not one princess there, but two!

As a rounded section of the tower leading to the topmost spire faces inland, it partially obscures the view inland from the top, or the sight of anybody on the top floor from where I was looking. But I caught a glimpse of long, windblown blond hair and a moment later, to my amazement, then saw a girl in a light, summery-looking dress climb up onto the top of the wall that encircled the topmost floor of the tower. I gasped, and stopped in my tracks. Holding her arms out perpendicular to her body, she began to walk clockwise around along the top of the wall.

After coming to the end of her walk at the circular part of the tower, she jumped back into the building. "Wow! Just my type!" I exclaimed aloud, and immediately became a little concerned that my exclamation could have been a bit more audible than intended.

I hoped I hadn't been overheard! I was still about 150 metres from the tower itself when I had uttered my ridiculous claim. I also reprimanded myself, not just for speaking out so loudly, but for the idea that the girl could have been "just my type" to myself, a married man probably twice her age. "Not to mention your cowardly disposition!" I added. In countless visits to the tower, I had never dared walk around the top floor wall, and knew I wouldn't dare to do so even now. In fact, such an idea had never even crossed my mind.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that I was still legally married even if I didn't live with my wife, despite the fact that I should probably not have been thinking about chasing girls who seemed to be about half my age even if I were single, despite the fact that I had little time to waste if I really intended to hike all the way to Kirk Michael that day,

and despite the fact that these daring girls were obviously not my kind, I decided I *had* to talk to them.

Or perhaps it was precisely *because* they were obviously not my kind that I had to talk to them. Not only had I myself never dared walk along the top of the tower's wall, I didn't know of anyone else who had, or at least I had never heard it mentioned. I was intensely curious.

Although I would normally not need to walk right up to the tower if following the coastal trail north, I stopped at the point where the coastal trail veered to the right, parting with the remaining short path to the tower, and pretended to be adjusting settings on my camera. In the corner of my eye, I saw two slim, long-haired girls come out of the tower and walk towards me, the taller girl light-haired, the other a brunette. As I had guessed, they were around 19 or 20 years old. The dark-haired girl wore tight jeans and a short denim jacket, and she smiled at me as I looked up from my camera.

We exchanged greetings and they would have continued on their way if I hadn't added: "That, er...skywalk you did just then looked very exhilarating!"

Both burst out in laughter. "Don't look at me!" the dark-haired girl told me, "I wouldn't dream of doing anything like that! That was her idea". She pointed to her companion, who simply shrugged and told me, "Yeh, it seemed like a good idea at the time...and it *was* very exhilarating!" Both had strong south-east England accents.

I tilted my camera upwards a little towards them and told the tall girl in a tone of mock regret, "Sorry I didn't get a photo of it..."

Her response was unexpected. "Oh! Oh, you wanted a *photo!*" she said as if it had been a revelation. Then, lightly, as if it was the easiest thing in the world, she added, "OK!" and turned to walk back the way she had come. Whether she was just play-acting or she would really have carried out her dangerous walk one more time I will never know, but her friend grabbed her and pulled her back. "No, no, Anita, he *doesn't* want a photo! He did, but now he's changed his mind!"

Both girls were obviously effervescent by nature, but were probably even more high-spirited than usual, and that was contagious. Especially when I learnt that they were from Guildford, "just down the road from where I live!"

"Oh, so you're on holiday here too?" Anita asked.

"Yeh, well, my parents live here, but I don't; I live in Brighton at the moment. Well, Hove, actually. Do you know it?" In reality, I had previously visited my sister's flat there, which she was shortly to vacate and rent to me, but hadn't actually moved in yet. But this was too good a chance to miss; the possibility of getting off to a good start with my new life in Brighton by having a couple of adventurous friends living not so far away!

Anita nodded and seemed about to say something when the dark-haired girl, whose name I never learnt, interjected: "Your parents live here? Really? It must be great living here!"

I shrugged. I wanted to turn the subject to Hove, what was soon to be my address there, and hopefully, their address or addresses in Guildford, along with telephone numbers. "It's alright; I like it, but..."

"Yeh, this place is so, like...ancient Saxon! It's fantastic!" Anita put in.

I was tempted to point out that the region had never been dominated by the Anglo-Saxons, at least not in ancient times, but I didn't want to get so far off topic. "Well, this part is, at least", I replied. "But there's not much in the way of work here, and in fact I would need a work permit, so now I'm living in Hove, just moved there from abroad actually. I live just near Hove Railway Station, have you been there? I live in Wilbury Avenue, it's just a few minutes' walk from the station. I think you can also get trains directly to Guildford from there, not sure..."

But no matter how much I tried to steer our short but interesting exchange towards Brighton and Guildford, they seemed only interested in the Isle of Man. The two ex-classmates described how they had taken a bargain one-pound promotional flight on a budget airline, knowing almost nothing at all about the Isle of Man, and I could hardly have withheld any information I had which may have been useful to them, so I did offer some further advice on how to spend their three days on the island. But crucially, I failed to interject any offers to show them around, and I failed to obtain any telephone numbers.

Nevertheless, by the time they went on their way, and I made my way to the edge of the outer edge of the headland, perhaps 50 or 100 metres north of the tower, I was still in high spirits, perhaps even light-headed. For some reason I felt I hadn't seen the last of those two fun-loving girls, and in fact I did know the place they were staying in Port Erin, The Falcon's Nest, very well. A small hotel with a pub I had spent many hours in, it would be easy to casually drop in and ask if they happened to be around.

## A Shocking Come Down

The coast of Northern Ireland was exceptionally clear; I felt I had to take a shot of it. But first, I took a photo of the drop down the rugged slope to the sea, which was not sheer, but very steep at about 65 or 70 degrees in places, partially rocky and partially grassy. I even noticed my own shadow in the viewfinder the moment I clicked the shutter, but the next moment both my shadow and its owner were tumbling roughly down the slope.

I came to a very painful stop about 15 or 20 metres down the slope, belly hugging the slope, the camera still hanging from my neck but now resting behind me, on my daypack. After ascertaining that camera and daypack were still with me and that I didn't seem to have broken any bones, I instinctively tried to rise and scramble back up the slope. But the surface I was trying to climb up, which appeared to be a grassy slope from a distance, was in fact not solid and secure, but rather made up mostly of rocks and scree held together only loosely with grass, bramble and other small and hardy plants. My right foot slipped as soon as I tried to rise and put weight on it; the small rocks it had made contact with bounced and rolled down towards the sea, and I immediately tumbled and slid a further five metres or so down the slope.

I tried to hug the slope to slow myself down and this seemed to work. This new position seemed to be even worse than that of a few moments before; even steeper and less stable. As I now lay spreadeagled on the rough and rocky slope, I realised the gravity of my situation. And gravity was the right word. It seemed that any attempt to climb back up the slope would only result in me sliding further down.

For a moment, I even considered shouting out to the girls for help. I knew the name of one, at least, and being of such a daring nature, I was sure she would try to help. Yet, if she did, we could both end up dead, or seriously injured on the rocks below. Would I be held accountable if she were injured or killed and I wasn't? And how would I even live with that?

That was one thought going through my mind, but that wasn't what stopped me from calling out. I had noticed a seagull flying close to the top of the tower when talking with the girls, and although the tower was now out of sight, I could still see the gull just over the top of the slope. It was soaring, looking like it was flying in the wind in the direction of Port Erin but not actually going anywhere, just held aloft by the force of the wind itself. That meant the wind had to be coming from the east and even if I had been standing by the tower, the girls would probably not have heard my shouts.

I also thought of my dad's ashes still only a short distance from where I now was. I thought first of his life, and how he had worked so hard all his working life in England before taking early retirement for health reasons. Though a 'come-over' as native Manx call people from mainland Britain and elsewhere who take up residence in the Isle of Man, he had taken up Manx nationality after moving to the island. His ashes were scattered over the place he loved. What a strange and ironic ending it would be for my own life if it ended there, 15 minutes walk from my father's ashes, after travels that had taken me through much of Europe, the Middle East, South and East Asia, and even as far away as New Zealand.

People who have had 'near-death experiences' often relate how they had seen their lives flash before them in their final moments. That wasn't how it was for me. But as I realised there was only one direction left for me to go, and that was down, I thought about all the events that had brought me that point, and about how things seemed fated to unfold shortly. I felt like a man awaiting execution on 'death row' must feel. It seemed like the only outcome that could possibly come to pass was that I would now slip, slide, tumble and fall the remaining distance to the rocks at the water's edge, and it was difficult to imagine that I would not at least be very badly injured. I could bleed to death with nobody even knowing where I was. The most optimistic outlook was that I would end up only breaking a few bones, but even that filled me with despair. If I didn't die, I could be an invalid the rest of my life. I also knew my mum would be worried sick while emergency services try to locate me, and

those two girls could even be investigated if anybody had seen them on their way to the tower. How had I let myself get into such a situation, just for the sake of a stupid photo?

Again I thought of my father, and his level-headed, no-nonsense personality. What would he have done, I asked myself? As soon as I had that thought, it seemed he was right there, talking to me, though it was probably only my imagination. He told me to just hold on, wait, and shout out for help every few minutes. There were bound to be other people at Bradda Head soon on such a fine summer morning, he told me; all I had to do was stay where I was until they came.

There was nothing at fault with that line of reasoning, but from where I lay glued to the slope I wouldn't actually see anybody coming, and if I didn't hear them I wouldn't know they were there. I couldn't just shout for help continuously; I would exhaust myself. It was strain enough just staying where I was.

I hardly dared to move, only too aware of the instability of the ground beneath me, but I did move my head to confirm a couple of things: one, yes there was a clear way right down to the sea if I slipped. The slope beneath me was not so steep either a little way to my right or my left, but if I slipped right where I was I would certainly not be able to control how I fell. The surface seemed even looser to my immediate right, but a little more solid to my left. I lay there for several minutes, unable to decide what to do. I was afraid that any move I made could be the wrong one, and perhaps my last one. But on other hand, I knew I would not be able to hold on indefinitely; it was only a matter of time before I would not be able to maintain my grip any longer. My whole body ached as it was.

Then I looked back up to the top of the slope, and to the right, towards the tower. The gull I had seen earlier was now gone, or so I thought. Then I turned my head to the left, careful not to move any other part of my body. And there was the gull, still soaring, but now 30 or 40 metres north of where I had last seen it.

I wondered about the gull as I looked on at its strange flight. Was it, like me, stuck and unable to get where it wanted, or was it actually enjoying its effortless flight, moving with barely any effort?

"Wish I could move like you", I commented as I gazed at the bird, still not daring to move, but knowing that eventually I would have to. "You may not be getting far, but at least you're in control!"

A slow realisation came over me. "Maybe I *can* move like you...!" The gull was truly in control, and no mistake. It was not flapping its wings, but merely making small movements to adjust their angle with respect to the wind, mostly moving just its wing tips. That was it! I had to do the same! I had to copy the way of the gull! No major movements to my 'wings', just some minor adjustments. I cautiously outstretched the fingers of my left hand, then extended the palm and forearm, and took a new grip no more than a hand's length to the left. It seemed firm enough. I brought my right arm slowly and carefully towards myself by a corresponding amount. That gave me a tiny little bit more grip on the ground I was hugging. Then I did the same with my feet.

Gradually, very gradually, I moved laterally several metres to my left. As I felt myself coming onto firmer ground, my movements became bolder and eventually I was rising and climbing up the remaining slope in the same way I had originally tried to.

Back at the top, just a few metres from where I had fallen, I half sat down and half collapsed onto the grassy ground, bringing my daypack and camera in front of me, and putting them on the ground with the camera on top. For perhaps 10 minutes I just sat there, my mind completely blank, unable to even think about what had just happened, or to consider what to do next.

Then I looked myself over. I was covered in cuts and scratches, as well as bruises on my arms and shoulders that, though only red now, I was sure would be purple in a day or two. I rolled up my sports pants to confirm that the same was true for my legs. OK, no bones broken and no joints sprained, or otherwise unable to move normally. I stood up, and sat down again to confirm that. And my clothes were hardly damaged at all, a tiny rip in my sports pants and another in my photographer's vest; apart from that just a few plant remains lodged in my clothes that needed to be extricated. I did that, then brushed the dirt from my clothes with the help of water from a small bottle of mineral water I had brought with me in case the flask of coffee was not enough to keep me hydrated. And then I considered my next move.

If I called it a day at this point, the comforts of home were just a 10- or 15-minute walk away. I knew I would have

to wear long sleeves once home and avoid my mum when entering the house, or she would be concerned with how I had let myself get so badly cut and bruised, and there was no way I could tell her the truth. I laughed out loud at what seemed like a ridiculous situation for a man of my age. Over three decades earlier, as a boy living in semi-rural northern England, that had also often been something I had to worry about after playing with friends outside, and I could remember often telling my friends something along the lines of, "my mum'll kill me if she sees how dirty my clothes are!" I would have to sneak into the house, change into clean clothes and dump my dirty ones deep into her 'dirty linen basket', all without her noticing me.

"You don't have to kill me, Mum", I muttered, "I'm perfectly capable of killing myself, as you can see!"

Then I turned my attention to the Minolta. The lens cap had come off, but the lens appeared unscratched. The camera seemed to be functioning OK, and I checked that with a photo of the tower from where I sat.

"Well, looks like we both got off lightly this time", I said to the camera. "I'm OK, and you seem to be in working order, too. So, we don't have any excuse for not pressing on..." With that I stood up and continued briskly on my hike to Kirk Michael. I had some catching up to do, time-wise.

The next stop was an idyllic little bay called Niarbyl. Lying around 15 kilometres further up the west coast, I expected it to take me at least three hours to get there.

En route I would very shortly pass a high point along the trail which was certainly my favoured spot in good weather for sitting down, taking a break, perhaps a bite to eat, or even cracking open a beer while taking in the magnificent panoramic view. It crossed my mind that I did indeed have a lunch box in my backpack. "Not at this time; too early for that", I told myself as images intruded on my mind of me taking it out and enjoying its contents. "I've lost enough time as it is! This time I've got to make hay while the sun shines." I had learnt my lesson about temptation.

Then the trail descended to Fleshwick Bay, a little gem of a bay almost hidden away until you got there, and that had usually been as far as I went on the dozens of hikes I had taken along the Raad in the 20-plus years my parents had lived in the Isle of Man. Only perhaps a handful of times had I actually gone as far as Niarbyl, and only three times as far as Peel. Just the Erin to Niarbyl stretch alone was a considerable round-trip hike of 30 ks in itself.

Only once before had I hiked as far as Kirk Michael. On that occasion, on a very similar sunny summer's day as this one, I had phoned my dad from a pub there, ostensibly to ask if he would like to come out for a drink, but actually more concerned with getting a free ride back!

"I'm at a pub called The Mitre, here in Kirk Michael", I told him on the phone, relishing the surprise in his response as he repeated the name of the village, then asked me if I was sure?

"Oh, I think so, the barman just told me it's the oldest pub on the island, and he should know", I laughed. "So it should be pretty easy to find." And I sat in the pub's beer garden enjoying a thirst-quenching beer while I waited for him.

That evening, after adding up the miles on a map, my dad had told me: "That's about 36 kilometres, from Erin to Kirk Michael. Don't think I've ever walked so far myself in a single day in my life...that's quite an achievement."

"Quite an achievement": A simple comment, yet compliment indeed coming from my father. I knew his sons had been mostly disappointments in life from his point of view; achievements had been few and far between.

"This time it's 47 kilometres, at least!" I told my deceased father as Fleshwick Bay came into view.

## Waking the Dead

By the time I reached Niarbyl bay, which lies just off the trail, the invigorating hike in the now-warm sunshine and the pristine clear air had already had a very positive effect on my sense of well-being, as well as my mental



stability. I certainly had not forgotten the events of a little earlier, and probably never would. But I was once again 'in the moment', entirely living in the now, and enjoying every minute of it.

Niarbyl is home to a fisherman's cottage which later became a restaurant and something of a tourist attraction. Four years previously, in 1998, the cottage had featured in a film called *Waking Ned* (in which it was home to the fictional character, Ned Devine), ostensibly set in Ireland, but actually shot entirely in the Isle of Man.

The film was a comedy about a lottery win shared amongst all the residents of a small Irish village, and it starred Ian Bannen and David Kelly. I approached the cottage and took a shot. It did indeed seem like the perfect place for a reclusive person who just wanted the quiet life, and the character in the film had fit that description.

In the film, Ned had the winning lottery ticket, but the shock of the win killed him where he sat. He was later discovered by Jackie O'Shea and Michael O'Sullivan, played by Bannan and Kelly respectively.

"He's dead too now", I muttered as it crossed my mind that Bannan had died not long after the film was released.

"None of us are here forever", I heard my dad say, perhaps in my head, perhaps close by me. "Nothing we can do about that. Might as well make the most of life while you have it; that's the only thing we can control to some degree, if we really want to..."

"We'll, you certainly did that", I told him.

One of the last times I had seen my father had been the day before I left the island after my previous visit only a little more than a year earlier. On that occasion, in the garage of the family home, he had told me: "One of the problems with a bike like this for an old fellow like me, is that you need to be able to get it upright again if you fall, or if it gets knocked over for some reason..."

He was talking about his 500cc Suzuki, which he then laid sideways on the floor of the garage before crouching down, lifting it up and setting it upright again.

"I can still do it", he commented, "but I can't say it's easy!" He then laid the bike carefully back down and invited me to pick it up again. I did.

"I can hardly pick the thing up myself!" I commented, unable to hide my sense of awe. And I wasn't just saying that. Even for a 40-year-old martial artist, it took some effort. It struck me that I would probably have real difficulties getting a much bigger bike, like the 1,000cc Honda Gold Wing, back up again at all.

That had been only several months before he passed away. So for me, not having witnessed his last weeks, I could say that my father had never been an old man, even in his final years.

That seemed to have been a due to psychological reasons as well as physical. Or, it was probably true to say that the two factors had mutually beneficial effects upon each other. Psychologically, he had never accepted being an old man, and sometimes mimicked a doddering old man, feeble in both mind and body. After being forced into semi-retirement, he vigorously pursued his interests in life. An example was the Manx Cat catamaran, which he purchased and renovated before sailing off with friends and family members on various trips, which included not only sailing to locations around Britain and Ireland, but even as far away as Spain.

Then came flying, which mostly involved gliders, that he learnt to fly at Jurby.

Jurby, I reflected, was only 10 or 12 kilometres further up the coast from Kirk Michael. Being a flat and open area and lying on the west coast where the setting sun would make twilight on such a sunny day a long-drawn out affair, would it really matter if it was evening by the time I got there, I asked myself? But then, I would certainly have to call my mum and ask her to drive all the way out there and pick me up, and I would probably have to spend the next three days sleeping! Would that really be fair?

"No dad, I don't think I could make *that* distance, even with your help!" I was still in an imaginary conversation with my deceased father, who seemed to assure me that my mum wouldn't mind the drive.

My father's final interest was film making, and that included being part of the film crew making *Waking Ned*,

mostly working at Cregneash village, but also at various other locations around the island, including this one. Being of a similar build to Bannon, he played his stand-in. A stand-in actor is someone who takes the place of an actor to help the camera department light the set, as well as tweak their blocking, composition, framing, and focus. To have the actual actors concerned carry out all this would of course be much more expensive than the stand-in, and that's another reason for having stand-ins.

Being there, looking on at Ned's Cottage, it was impossible not to once again let my mind become flooded with memories of that character, larger-than-life in life, and still very much with me nearly a year after his life ended. But finally I broke out of my reveries and returned to the trail at something half way between a walk and a run. There was still a long way to go to Kirk Michael.

My mind turned to how I was going to get back to Erin from Kirk Michael? I knew there were buses on Sundays in the summer months, but today was a Friday.

But these mundane considerations were quickly replaced with other thoughts, perhaps unavoidable after Niarbyl and memories of my dead father.

Was death really the end, I asked myself, as my father himself believed? Or could it be that my dad, or some remnant part of him, some electrical energy that didn't want to leave the place he loved was in some sense still lingering on there, on some other level? The inexplicable impression of having seen a man, more than once, at the village near my own in Hong Kong came back. Every culture in the world has a tradition of ghost stories, and Chinese culture is no exception, indeed it's teeming in them.

Some cultures, I reflected, differentiated between ghosts and spirits; some didn't. Generally speaking, ghosts in most cultures did not have volition, they were simply some remnant electrical charge of some event that lingered on in the location the event took place, sometimes for hundreds of years. Typically, they would represent a kind of re-playing of some momentous, often tragic, event which once took place

I remembered seeing a TV programme which mentioned a plumber working in a York cellar who claimed to have witnessed a whole troop of Roman soldiers walk right through the cellar as if the cellar walls didn't exist, and he even gave a detailed description of their uniforms and other aspects of their appearance. There had even been reports of people seeing the ghosts of Roman soldiers on the M6 motorway.

That brought to mind a place I been very close to earlier in my hike. A couple of kilometres away from the coastal route I had hiked from Port St. Mary to Port Erin - and approximately equidistant from both - on the peninsular-like chunk of land to the south-east of those two towns lies an ancient burial ground, right next door in fact to Gregneash village, where most of *Waking Ned* had been filmed.

That place is called Meayll Circle, and it is located upon Mull Hill. The circle is a chambered cairn, believed to have been built over one thousand years ago. On several occasions, myself and other family members had taken our dog, Gemini, to that spot, and each time Gemini had inexplicably spent most of the time barking at the ground, as if she could see something we couldn't.

That fit the description of 'ghosts', just like the various Roman soldier sightings. But what about spirits? A ghost could perhaps appear and its appearance be taken to mean something, but if it had no volition it couldn't affect you in any way. It couldn't, for example, help you if you were in trouble.

"Like hanging on a cliff?" you mean, I asked myself. I then reminded myself to keep my mind on the trail. Some parts, even here, were quite steep.

"Pretty flat after Peel though" I told myself, as if it was something to look forward to. I couldn't have a mishap on a section like that if I tried, could I?

But then a very disturbing thought came to mind.

I was a story I had seen reported in newspapers, then followed up with an investigative journalist's report. It involved a hiker, hiking alone in Taiwan. And the trail he hiked wasn't even a difficult trail, but an easy and well-known one.

But to properly understand this story, a little background cultural knowledge is required. In traditional Taiwanese society the loss of a female who was due to be married yet still unmarried at the time of her death is considered particularly tragic, and to put her soul to rest she must be married. This custom, called '*minghun*', entails carrying out a marriage ceremony in which the finance or boyfriend marries the dead woman.

The hiker in the story, a single man, was driven to the trailhead by a friend, who took a photo of him as he started off on his hike. When he hadn't returned home by the next day and couldn't otherwise be contacted, local police carried out a search and found his body, which had apparently fallen from the side of trail. The puzzling part was why a fall of only a couple of metres had killed him? He didn't even have any broken bones.

Later, the friend who had dropped the hiker off had his film developed and, strangely, noticed a young woman in the photo he had taken of the hiker setting off at the trailhead. She was standing, smiling, only a few paces away. Yet he was sure he had seen no other person at that spot.

The journalist and the hiker's friend went to the nearest village to ask around if anybody knew the young woman in the photo? A number of people confirmed she had died in an accident several years before. They had wanted to carry out a *minghun* marriage ceremony for her, but her boyfriend was not willing.

"That's got nothing to do with hiking in the Isle of Man, and I'm not single!" I told myself, and pushed the thought from my mind.

I stopped only for a short rest and a few bites to eat from my lunch box at Glen Maye, a picturesque glen with a shallow, pristine clear river and a waterfall. I didn't want to eat enough to make me feel too relaxed. By the time I got moving, back on the trail, it seemed I was only marginally behind schedule. It was still only early afternoon and Kirk Michael by late afternoon was beginning to look like increasingly likely. I resolved to delay the final decision on whether to go all out to Jurby until I got to Kirk Michael.

By the time I was perhaps 20 minutes from Peel thoughts of the Taiwan news report on the dead hiker and suchlike had been left behind, and my self-confidence had fully returned. Even though some parts of the trail between Glen Maye and Peel were quite steep, I was not only walking fast on this section of the trail, but on a couple of occasions actually jogging.

That came to an end when I heard something fall from my daypack. Looking to my left as I slowed down I saw the bottle of mineral bottle (which had been in the daypack's left side pocket) bouncing and sliding towards the sea. Although generally environmentally protective by nature, on this occasion I left the bottle where it was, close to the shore. I was not going to endanger my life once more for the sake of retrieving a plastic bottle! My greater concern was that the exercise had left me 'parched' and I didn't want to drink coffee; I would have to wait until I got to Peel, and buy some mineral water or juice there before going on to Kirk Michael.

## Pride Comes before A Dive

A short while later, Peel Castle, Peel Harbour, and the town itself came into view. I glanced at my watch: I was actually now making pretty good time, as good as I could have hoped for even without my fall. I congratulated myself on that, telling myself "You can't keep a good man down!" and waving my fist at some imaginary force I took to have thrown me down the cliff at Bradda Head, when in fact it had probably been nothing more than my own inattentiveness!

Now I felt I knew with certainty I was going to make it to Kirk Michael, maybe even Jurby! And I definitely had enough time to take a few photos in Peel.

Peel Castle is set on St Patrick's Isle, a very small island off the coast and just to the south of Peel Harbour, and the sandy beach which lies to the north of that. Strategically located as such, an army in this fortress could easily cut off potential invaders to the north, while remaining relatively safe with nothing connecting the castle to the mainland but for a narrow land bridge. The castle was first built by Viking rulers in the 11th century, in place of older stone Celtic monastic buildings, and a part of it (the round tower) was originally part of the Celtic monastery, so taken as a whole it represents a significant chunk of the island's ancient history. I took a shot of the castle itself, which brought me to the end of my first roll of film. I loaded a new roll, having decided I had to get at least

a few shots of the castle itself, and the town as seen by the castle.

I walked down to the castle and onto the land bridge, which in modern times has become topped with a tarmaced road with metal handrails on both sides. On the left side of this road, I used the handrail for stability and took a shot of the coast looking south, from where I just come.

Then I went over to the other side of the road, to get a shot or two of Peel town itself, the beach and harbour. But my mind was not really on the task at hand. Rather, it was on the possibility of dropping by at the Falcon's Nest in Port Erin, the hotel where the two girls I had met at Bradda told me they were staying. I had been in the pub there on many occasions, and I pictured myself there again the next night, explaining something like this to the two Guildford girls:

"Actually, when I met you yesterday, I was on a round-island hike. There's a hiking trail running all the way along the coast called the Way of The Gull. It's pretty long at over 160 ks in full, I managed just over a third yesterday; probably do most of what's left tomorrow. Want to come along?"

"A third?" Anita would ask. "You mean over 50 kilometres?"

"Yeh, it wasn't easy. I mean, I've hiked a lot further than that in one day, but this was a tough one; a bit 'iffy' in parts..."

"Wow!" the other girl would exclaim. Both girls would be awestruck!

I must have been kneeling at the handrail for several minutes, ostensibly using it as a makeshift tripod, but taking no pictures at all as I turned thoughts of this imaginary meeting over and over in my head, probably with an expression of a simpleton in nirvana on my face. Then I became aware that there were now other people going back and forth on the land bridge and that my pose and expression may have been attracting their attention.

I stood up without having even pressed the shutter and decided to adjust my vantage point slightly by standing on the other side of the handrail, or perhaps sitting on it. I swung, first, my left leg astride and over the railing, then my whole body, the camera held in my right hand, my left hand grasping the railing. The momentum was such, however, that I almost fell directly into the sea and if I hadn't got a firm grasp on the railing, I would have. But the camera went flying out of my right hand.

I don't think I'll ever forget the sight of the camera flying through the air and plunging into the sea. The entire thing seemed to happen in slow motion, and though there were probably only seconds between the moment the camera hit the surface, and the moment I did, I had to mentally consider a number of facts within that time.

The first was the water's depth, which was difficult to gauge. On the other side of the road, the water had barely reached the wall of the land bridge, but here it seemed it could well be too deep to paddle; I would have to swim. And that was the other main consideration. I hadn't done any swimming for many years and I had never been much good at it to begin with.

Nevertheless, all these thoughts must have gone through my mind at lightning speed, and they didn't affect my actions in any way, which were to quickly drop my daypack on the ground, slip off my shoes and photographer's jacket and dive into the water. Just before I did, it also crossed my mind that I had probably never dived from such a height - at least two metres - in all my life, only from the water's edge, and if the water was not in fact at least as deep as my height, I could also hurt myself by diving instead of jumping. But again, that didn't slow my actions by even a fraction of a second. I knew it was vital that I retrieve the camera as soon as possible. Although there are cameras specially designed for underwater photography, a regular SLR could easily be damaged by water, and the film inside it ruined.

The added height actually seemed to help the trajectory of my dive. I cut into the water at just the right angle and the added speed helped send me directly towards my camera. I saw it clearly, grabbed it and surfaced. It was only then that I realised the water was indeed quite a bit deeper than my height. In a kind of one-armed backstroke, with the camera held above water, I swum passed some rocks and towards dry land.

I came ashore on a broad concrete path that led from land to sea, probably originally intended to facilitate the

mooring of boats and bringing goods off them.

My actions had attracted the attention of a number of onlookers, several of whom came down to where I was now sitting to ask if I was alright? One chap almost insisted on calling an ambulance to take me for a check-up, but I assured him repeatedly that I was fine. "I'm a regular swimmer back home, so that was no big deal really", I lied. I could only convince them because I knew my actions must have looked a lot more masterful than they really were.

But even as I spoke to these people, I quickly slipped the lens off, deciding to sacrifice the film I had just loaded, and turned the camera body towards the ground. Only a couple of drops of water dripped out, to my relief.

And that was the end of my hike.

My dive had literally put a damper on my enthusiasm for getting to Kirk Michael, or even beyond. Soaked to the skin, I decided to make the most of the remaining time to get myself, and more importantly my camera, as dry as possible.

The whole event brought back to mind, as I sat there drying out, a story I had heard from one of my Korean housewife students in Hong Kong. It concerned a friend of hers who she was with at the local swimming pool, while their school-age children practiced their swimming. This other woman also had a toddler, who somehow managed to get free of her pram while the two women chatted, and when the baby's mother finally did glance towards the pram, her baby girl was not there!

With horror, she saw her baby at the edge of the pool's deep end, but before she could act, the baby jumped in! Without a word, the mother ran to the pool and jumped right in, not even considering the fact that she couldn't swim! Both fully clothed and wearing shoes, mother and baby sank quickly, but the mother held her baby as high as she could and walked along the bottom to the shallow end. Afterwards, both were rushed to hospital, but both were fine.

In my case, however, the emergency rescue was only for a camera!

I felt there wasn't any point in looking around in a small town like Peel for a shop able to carry out camera repairs; I knew the camera would just end up getting sent off to Douglas, so I took it there myself the next morning, and found a shop able to carry out repairs, or rather, to send it off to a place located locally that could.

A few days later I was on the bus to Douglas, having received a phone call to let me know that the camera was ready to be picked up. I would hopefully also put the repaired camera to some immediate use. Soon to leave the Isle of Man, I reminded myself, I had almost no photographic records made in all the time I had spent in Douglas over the years.

I walked into the camera shop, a rather small establishment packed full of just about anything a photographer could want. The manager of the shop was a man of around my own age, with the build and appearance, I felt, of the actor Bruce Willis at that age, and a very authoritative air.

He took a small box, originally the packaging of another camera, from under the counter, placed it on the counter, then took the lens out and also placed it on the counter, closer to me. Shaking his head, he looked me in the eye and told me: "I'm afraid this is a write-off. They couldn't do anything to salvage this."

I sighed. I had mentally prepared myself for the worst-case scenario of having to buy a new lens. The prices of lenses, even of the same mount, or even designed specifically for just one camera brand, can vary dramatically, but I knew there would probably be something workable within my budget, even if it wasn't ideal, or didn't match up to the damaged lens in terms of performance.

"It's the salt in the seawater, you see", he explained. "You would have been better washing it off with ordinary drinking water first, before letting it dry. Once those salt particles have dried on the surface of the lens..." He shook his head.

But there was worse to come. He then took the camera from the box, and placed it next to the lens. "Same for the body, really", he told me an air of resignation. "I mean, they can repair it for you, but they're pretty sure you

wouldn't want it done, so they've sent it back to me."

My heart sank.

"Frankly, it just wouldn't be worth it", he told me with a nonchalant shrug of one shoulder. "Cost you almost as much as a new camera; maybe about 70, 80 percent the cost of a new budget SLR like this."

"I see..." I took the camera and lens and put them both in my daypack. "Well, let me think about it. I may still get it fixed anyway. How much was the service fee?"

I would have left the shop at that point, but the manager probably saw an opportunity to sell me a new camera. The Maxxum 7000s were no longer being made, he said, but if he were me, he'd use take the opportunity to upgrade.

"There are some incredibly good digital SLRs coming onto the market now", he told me, "like the Canon EOS-D60. They're a lot more expensive, but you'll probably be glad to have made the transition to digital a couple of years down the line; this is the future, believe me!"

Without a word from me to suggest I may be interested in buying such a camera, he placed several glossy sheets of paper he had probably printed out himself on the counter, introducing some high-end digital SLRs and their prices, which were astronomical!

I laughed and told him he was probably right, but they were way beyond my budget. In retrospect, if I had indeed had so much money at my disposal, and I decided to buy a digital SLR at that point, I would probably have regretted it for the rest of my life! The functionality and capacities of the cameras he introduced would have seemed completely inadequate within 10 or 12 years.

"The Canon EOS 500, or better yet the 5000N would be a good choice if you want to stay with film", he told me. "And that's still a good step up from Maxxum."

I shook my head. "No...that wouldn't, I mean, that wouldn't be...that wouldn't be the same..."

He probably sensed that I was a 'Minolta man', unwilling to switch brands so easily. He then told me a friend of his had a secondhand Maxxum 9000 he was looking to sell, though he didn't know his friend's asking price off-hand. "That would be perfect for you, and definitely an upgrade from the 7000."

How could I explain that even that wouldn't be the same? But in the end I did leave the shop with, not one but two new cameras: disposable cameras that I would throw away before even leaving the island. I would soon be leaving the Isle of Man, and I had come into Douglas hoping to take a few photos of the capital city. This is what I still intended to do, one way or another! I walked south of the harbour to a promontory called Douglas Head, which overlooks the harbour, the bay, and in fact all of the town and some way beyond.

I had told the manager of the photography shop that I would think over my options for getting the Maxxum repaired or buying a new camera, but in reality I knew that neither were possibilities. I just didn't have the funds.

### The Way of the Shoestring Outdoor Photographer

But what made the whole thing even more depressing for me was that in Peel I seemed to have ignored one of the basic tenets of the shoestring outdoor photographer.

It had actually crossed my mind after coming out the water that I could have used the last of my coffee to clean the seawater from my lens. Coffee was of course something that could also damage a lens, but it would be a lot less damaging than salt water and perhaps could have been successfully washed away with clean water later. In that scenario, I may have been left with a working lens, and then maybe, just maybe, I would have been able to fork out the cost of the camera body repairs.

But as it was, there was no way I buy another lens *and* pay for the camera body repairs.

And the reason I hadn't used the coffee to clean the salt water off? I was concerned that doing so would seem ridiculous, even crazy, to the gathered onlookers. The basic tenet I had violated was that the thoughts other people may or may not have with respect to your actions never take precedence over practical considerations.

While that may be one basic principle of the shoestring outdoor photographer, overall, the way of the shoestring outdoor photographer can be summed up thus: to overcome disadvantages by making the most of the choices available under often very tight financial constraints.

The photographer on a low budget will share many of the same choices as the more well-funded photographer, such as whether or not to go out at the crack of dawn to capture a sunrise (but will probably be more inclined to disregard inconvenience in taking the choice more likely to result in good shots).

What the photographer on a low budget isn't likely to be concerned with is which of a variety of lenses would be the most suitable for the photo he or she has in mind. The choice of lenses is likely to be very limited, so the shoestring photographer has to be creative to make up for this disadvantage. Usually, being creative is all that's needed, but sometimes you may even end up (perhaps unwittingly) putting your life in danger.

But at other times, there's nothing at all the photographer on a low budget can do make up for financial disadvantage, even throwing caution to the wind, and these were the circumstances I was faced with after visiting the camera shop in Douglas.

Given the choice of repairing the camera that had changed my life or buying a new one, I would have opted for the repair. But I simply didn't have the choice; I couldn't afford either. This was akin to having to put down a sick pet that only a very expensive operation would save. I just didn't have the money for this 'operation'.

Sitting on the bench overlooking Douglas harbour and bay, these were the thoughts that went through my mind. The weather conditions were perfect, the location was perfect, the scene in front of me picture-postcard lovely. All I lacked was a real camera.

I felt a little self-conscious as I held the little box-like camera in my right hand, and noted its make, Kodak, and that it would take just 27 exposures before being tossed in the bin. It wasn't just that I felt nothing much could come from a disposable camera. Nor even that I felt slightly embarrassed to be out to take photos with such an apology for a proper camera, even though there were few people around to see me save for a couple of dog walkers. It also seemed somehow disrespectful, even insulting to be taking photos with such a farcical little item on the same day I had earlier imagined I would soon once again be taking photos with the Minolta. It seemed akin to a king marrying his ugly, mentally retarded maid the day after the tragic death of his beloved queen.

"None of us are here forever, including kings and queens", I thought I heard a voice close by say. "Nothing we can do about that. Might as well make the most of life while you have it; that's the only thing we can control to some degree, if we really want to..."

"I suppose you're right, old man...once again", I sighed, and looked down again at the disposable camera, noting that it seemed even a couple of steps down from the Kodak Instamatic I had first used in the Isle of Man all those years before as a boy.

"Well, it's not ideal", I chuckled. "But I suppose you have to make the most of what's available, whether that's in terms of gear, the 'F8 and be there' philosophy, or whatever...that's the way of the shoestring outdoor photographer."

I stood up from the bench and started looking around for a better vantage point.

The End