

Chapter 19 – Last Years in Penang

(2013 - 2015)

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(5th October 2015 – Penang)

A week today we will be on our way. Over the last three months or so we have been preparing to leave Penang for the UK and so far, touch wood, our planning has actioned very smoothly. The major must-have was a spouse's settlement visa for Gek to enter the UK as my wife and not just as a visitor. Completing the online visa application, collecting the supporting evidence and the submission process itself occupied our time and minds until we had the appropriate 2 inch by 4 inch piece of paper stuck into Gek's Singapore passport. A day to celebrate was that when we had the visa physically in our hands. Everything else concerned with the move was under our own control and any issues that may have arisen always had a Plan B. Not the case with the visa. Without it Gek and I would have had to become tramps, itinerants wandering the planet, calling no place home.

Our Return from the UK

In April 2013, Gek and I returned to the UK for a five month stay. The intention was to look for a place in Wales where we would like to relocate to from Penang in 2015 or perhaps 2016. Of course, we were also coming back to see you guys again after nearly five years away. I did write about our UK visit in my 'A Granddad's Stories' as things happened, so I don't intend to repeat myself here. Suffice to say we did have a lovely time in your company and we did decide on a place to return to, Caerphilly just to the north of Cardiff. Caerphilly County borders the Beacon Beacons to the north and the M4 motorway to the south, fulfilling our criteria for a place not too far from a city but within easy reach of the coast and the mountains. The houses there are also affordable for us to buy, not an insignificant criteria to be met. Mission accomplished.

On our return to Penang, Gek and I took up our life again on the Island with a change of address. We had only been home a few days when Gek announced that she wanted to sell her Relau apartment and rent somewhere else to stay for the remaining time we had in Malaysia. And so we did. In double quick time we had relocated to a brand-new rented apartment, not a mile away, in the 1-Sky Condominium. This new place was twice as big as the Relau apartment with plenty of open space for Gek to do her art and me to make the model houses. An added bonus was the fabulous view the balcony had looking east towards the Perak and Kedah mountains on the Malaysian mainland. Sunrises and sunsets, I photographed aplenty over the two years we lived there. Well, as per usual, we were not long back home when we were planning the next trip away, this time to Taiwan.

Taiwan

[Blog Entry for Taiwan 2014, March](#) and [April](#)

In March 2014 we took off for a short, by our standards at least, trip to Taiwan, a first visit for both of us. Fortunately for us there was a direct flight between Penang and Taipei thereby avoiding the need to transit through KL.

(13th November 2015 – Ystrad Mynach, Wales)

I know, all over the place I am, but these are interesting times. Gek and I arrived back in the UK on the 13th October, exactly a month ago today. And what a month it has been. Polly met us at Birmingham Airport before driving us over to her flat in West Bridgford to recover from our 20 + hour journey. A few days later, after collecting Gek's all-important UK spouse's visa card from the post office in Beeston, we took off again for South Wales calling in Tetbury to visit you guys on the way. Within a couple of days arriving in Caerphilly, we had rented a house in Ystrad Mynach, a job quickly done as the renting agent recommended us as suitable tenants to the landlord without the need to follow up on our references - viewed the house on Tuesday, handed the keys on Friday, thanks to the very nice man at Brinsons Estate Agents.

As we were arriving in Taipei late in the evening, we had pre-booked into the airport hotel as the airport is some forty-eight km from the city centre, making for an easier landing in the country. No need to rush, this is the free and easy way to do things. Next morning we took a taxi into town to find our berths for the next week, in an apartment block just to the north of the city centre.

(14th March 2016 – Hengoed, Wales)

Sorry for the rather long pause. We have been rather busy. More of which later. We now have a new home at 17 Kestrel View in Hengoed having gotten the keys on the 13th of December and moved in on the 13th of January. Back in country three months and settled. Not bad going.

For our stay in Taipei, Gek had found us a rather nice self-catered apartment in the Zhongshan district of the city with easy access to a local shopping complex. Taiwan was already turning out to be quite different to how I expected it to be. Not at all like mainland China. More like Malaysia or Wales. I am not talking here about the infrastructure, which I have to say is pretty utilitarian being designed as it is to withstand earth quakes, no, I am talking about the 'feel' of the place and in particular the attitude of the people to strangers like us. Very friendly they are. Just one incident will illustrate what I mean. Gek and I got totally disorientated in the city's main market area and could not figure out from our paper map where the heck we were. This despite Gek being fluent in Mandarin and four other Chinese dialects. When suddenly this young woman was at my elbow, asking, in perfect English, if she could be of assistance. Not only that she took us part way out of the area to make sure we were going to be OK. Impatience would be all you would get in London, that being my own experience of that city. A highlight of our stay in Taipei was the trip down the Tamsui river to the estuary port of Danshui. Our transport was a very small tourist launch which had also been pre-booked by a small tourist group complete with tourist guide who didn't stop talking for the whole hour cruise. I escaped up on the roof for audio break.

A visit to the National Museum in Taipei was, I am sorry to say, a bit of a let-down. It is billed as a must-see place to visit but to my mind, it is a museum with exhibits out of context. They should be back home in the Forbidden City in Beijing, difficult, I know, given the history and the antagonism between the two Chinas. This collection of Chinese art and artefacts is why so many people come to Taiwan from the mainland. Another must see, for me at least, was Taipei's wonderful dollhouse museum, full of very elaborate models. Their collection of American made box-rooms is amazing for the detail and quality of their build. I did search and search for something special to buy in the gift shop, but nothing noteworthy could I find.



A Couple

Having had our fill of the city, our second port of call was Keelung on the north coast of the island which we reached by the local train service. Here we stayed in a small dock side hotel. What a contrast of accommodation to that of our Taipei stay. But very comfortable. For this tour of Taiwan, we had opted to use only public transport and the odd chauffer driven car for special visits to out of the way places we were interested in seeing. From Keelung we took the day tourist minibus down the coast to the Yehliu Geo Park and the Ju Ming Sculpture Park. The one annoying aspect of visiting Taiwan, I am sad to say, is the number of mainland Chinese tour groups that seem to swarm all over the place. Mainly transported about on hundreds of large double-decker coaches which run together

in convoy. You cannot get away from them. They are everywhere you go and in numbers. For almost for the whole 12-day visit to the island, I was the only European in view.

Ju Ming was born in Taiwan. He was apprenticed to a local woodcarver, Lee Chin-chuan from the Temple of the Empress of Heaven when he was 15 years old. He learned about woodcarving and painting during his apprenticeship, which set the foundation for his future career as a sculptor. Ju Ming did woodcarving during the days and practiced painting during the nights. Lee Chin-chuan would say, "If a sculptor does not know how to paint, it is like an architect who can build houses but does not know how to do blueprint design drawings." He believed that if a sculptor wants to carve well, he or she has do lots of sketches, and most importantly not just copy other people's style which is not the usually Chinese way; otherwise, the person is just an artisan, not an artist. In 1959, Ju finished his apprenticeship and opened his own studio. I first noticed Ju from a group of figures he sculpted that were sitting beside Orchard Road in Singapore, just outside the Art Museum. I didn't at the time know the artist, only really making the connection when we visited his museum here. He has a very distinctive, chunky style which is all his own.

From Keelung we moved down the east coast to Hualien taking the high-speed train from Taipei, not a super-fast train but fast enough. Our accommodation, a bed and breakfast, another contrasting accommodation run by a lovely family who made us feel very much at home. One young woman of the house was so intrigued by my blue eyes that she got much too close for comfort with a rather overlong held gaze into them. Very disturbed, was I. Whilst here we met up with David and Gloria, friends of Gek's from her time at Emerson College. David was the college odd job man about the place and Gloria was a student along with Gek. Strange to relate but not only were they visiting Hualien at the same time as ourselves, but they were staying in practically the next street to our B & B, all totally unplanned. I spotted David walking down the street from our hired car and caused him to near jump out his skin when I bellowed his name out the car window. We had a very enjoyable catch up evening together.



We hired a car with driver to take us to the Taroko Gorge some thirty minutes' drive north of the city. What an extraordinary place. The gorge is 1 km deep in places being only a few meters wide from top to bottom. The mountains are in perpetual motion with small rocks continuously being dislodged from the cliff faces. In order to walk safely though a section of the gorge you are issued with a hard hat to protect your head from the rain of small and sometime large rocks dislodged from the gorge's cliffs. As you are progressing along the path, you can hear every few minutes a faint 'chip' as another bit of the cliff hits the tarmac.

We found a dollhouse shop in Hualien run by a chap who made miniature flowers, a couple of which I bought for the Black and White model. He also owned a restaurant around the corner which of course we had to visit. Here were displayed the models he had made, quite impressive.

After a couple of days in Hualien, we boarded a short haul plane for Taichung. Our bed and breakfast hosts organised a taxi for the transfer to the local airport with a young driver they frequently used. Not being at all familiar with the geography of our surroundings, we both became a little concerned when our young friend seemed to be taking all the backstreets he could find, happy crisscrossing one wide road after another. Sensing our confusion, he explained that this, though a longer route to the airport, was quicker at this time of day than the 'normal' route. He did hasten to add that the fare would still be the same as agreed with our hosts as we departed the B&B. I liked Taiwan even more after meeting this young man. I have since learnt that Taiwan has the second lowest crime rate on the planet, after Japan. An honest bunch, the Taiwanese.

Taichung, is a city slowly developing, very slowly developing. The decline in the manufacturing sector in Taiwan has hit the local economies pretty hard. The new metro system is taking forever to build. We met up with an ex-colleague of Gek from Emerson college and a Singapore friend from Gek's varsity days in Singapore. It is great to meet people you already know when you visit strange places. They take you to restaurants and places of interest you would otherwise not see. A place we found on our own was the city art museum. There were several primary school children there the day we paid our visit, wandering around not really understanding what they were there for. One group of young lads, not more than ten years old, distracted themselves by walking behind me repeatedly whispering "fuck, fuck, fuck", followed by behind hand sniggers. I don't quite know what they expected of me, perhaps not to completely ignore them, which is what I did. Not getting the anticipated reaction, they soon got bored with their little game and fucked off to bother someone else, no doubt.

(2nd May 2016 – Hengoed, Wales)

I did like Taichung, a very liveable city I found. After a day trip out to the Moon Lake, we boarded a high-speed train back to Taipei. What a ride, 150 miles per hour. We whizzed up the coastal plain through paddy field after paddy field and we were pulling into Taipei's station having covered 100 miles in what seemed like no time at all. And for just 8 quid. Cheaper than chips!!! We didn't linger in Taipei long, spending only one night at the airport hotel before catching our return flight to Penang.

Australia's Northern Territory

[Blog Entry for The Northern Territory - 2014, June](#) and [July](#)

Not long after our return to the Pearl Island we had a planned visit from our three friends, Mary-Ann, Alice and Jo. We spent an enjoyable five days together, eating, touring the island, eating some more, etc. It is so relaxing in their company, the five of us being kindred spirits. Talk was of a possible trip to Japan together in the not too distant future, an idea that came to fruition the following year when four of us took a free and easy driving holiday across Hokkaido. But before then, Gek and I were set on for a visit to Darwin and an overnight train ride on The Ghan.

Gek and I were becoming increasingly aware that our time in South East Asia was running out, with our planned return to the UK imminent, most likely within the next couple of years. We needed to get in all the places we wanted to visit and to do all the things we wanted to achieve before moving on to pastures new. For Gek at least, the Northern Territory was the only state she hadn't visited in Australia, she having already visited Tasmania before we had gotten together. For me, it would complete my visits to the six main island states of Australia. So, Darwin it was to be. At only a weeklong, this was to be a flying visit by our standards and was the most expensive per day trip we were to make. The

Ghan is a five-star experience and we spared no cost on the accommodation at Uluru visitors' centre either.



Darwin turned out to be quite a surprise. I don't know why I had the impression that Darwin would be a down and out place, but, dare I say it, the city turned out to be much more sophisticated than I ever expected and with such a rich, although short history. After a couple of nights at a B&B by a marina full of expensive looking motor yachts, we boarded the Ghan for the overnight train ride

through the centre of Australia to Alice Springs. The Ghan is just short of three quarters of a kilometre long, making it a long walk to dinner for some guest. The train also included a couple of car transporter wagons for passengers to travel with their means of transport, a much more sensible way to cross the vast, desert interior of the continent than on four wheels. From our carriage berth window, we watched the totally flat, sand coloured terrain dotted with a myriad of termite hills for as far as the eye could see, mile after mile after mile.

Mealtimes on the Ghan are the only events that disturb the peace of your day. At each sitting you are paired off with another couple of travellers, who were almost exclusively retirees and Australian, there being very few foreign tourists aboard the train travelling with a berth. There were lots of backpackers in the seating only carriages at the back of

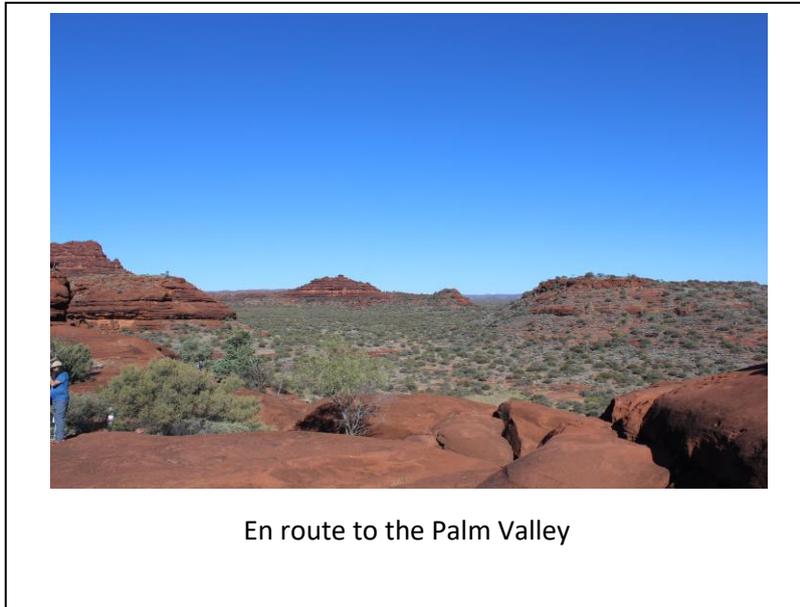


the train, though. For the first couple of meals we dined with a retired school's headmaster and his schoolteacher wife. A nice enough couple although I got the impression that the husband considered me to be a bit of a puffer, me not being able to converse about Australian rules football or rugby. Being English to boot seemed just to confirm his impression of all things limey, i.e. wet. After a brief stop off for a cruise through the Katherine Gorge where we were surprised to see people swimming in the river with

crocodiles sunning themselves on the banks, we left the Ghan to trundle on to Adelaide at Alice Springs where we spent a couple nights before catching a coach to Uluru.

For an excursion out of Alice we booked an outback day trip in a large 4x4 bus to Palm Valley. The day of the trip was Gek's birthday, and I don't know how or why I mentioned this to the lady taking our booking for the day, but as we stepped up on the 4x4 the next morning, the passengers already seated chorused a happy birthday for Gek. What a good start to an amazing day among the tropical palms in an otherwise desert terrain. The palms are all that remain of what was once, thousands of years ago, a very different place entirely, a tropical rain forest. These types of palms are now found in the places like Malaysia which is anything but a very dry desert. You soon find that Australian tour guides love to talk about their country and this day out was no exception. Our lady driver and guide, who was originally from Italy, was very much in love with her adopted country. We were told to buckle on our seat belts as the terrain was a little rough and indeed, several times we left our seats and would have smacked our heads on the vehicle's roof if not for these restraints. Never had to use seat belts to stop vertical movement before.

For a time, our guide was chatting with her colleague, a company trainee. Fortunately for us passengers on the day, she had inadvertently left her microphone on and we were treated to stories of her more interesting previous encounters with the travelling public. In one story she told of a very belligerent man who was totally nonplussed that a woman was driving this fearsome piece of machinery and let her know about it. In his view she should have been at home stoking a kitchen stove, not wrestling a heavy 4x4 bus come lorry down dried up river beds in the Australian outback. By the end of the eight-hour day they had been practically at war with the 'gentleman' accusing her, amongst other things, of being a racist. Strong willed, feisty, assertive yes.



En route to the Palm Valley

But a racist? Never in a month of Sundays. All the bus was listening with feinted disinterested, staring out the windows at the passing rocks, all very quiet we were, intent on catching every word.

Alice Springs is a long way from Uluru, 300 miles away by road, or put another way, one day's coach ride. The upside is that this is a road to nowhere else but Uluru. To have two

other vehicles in view at any one time is a rarity. But it still takes a six-hour drive to get there. Once there, there is only one place to stay, a very pleasantly discreet human encampment offering a wide variety of accommodation types, from 5 Star luxury to dormitory hostels. We plumped for something in between, a self-catered apartment and very comfortable it was too. Since we were visiting during the Southern Hemisphere's winter, the climate was very pleasant, with early morning temperature below 5 deg C, a surprise, given we were in the dead centre of Australia's fabled hostile dry desert.

(7th October 2016 – Hengoed, Wales)

Sorry for another rather long pause. Today the last of the major refurbish projects on the bungalow is underway, the garage conversion to a comfortable workshop.



Uluru

Everybody here is here purely to see the Rock and quite specular it is too in the morning sunrise and the evening sunset. But it is not the only rock outcrop to visit, also nearby are Kata Tjuta, also known as The Olgas. These are a group of sandstone lumps sticking out of the plain that you can walk between. Uluru is an Australian icon and is much pictured in the world's media. In spite of this and the comment from a lady on the Ghan 'that it is just a rock. Why would I want to go look at it?', I found that being there stood in front of it, quite awe inspiring.

From the Uluru we flew back to Alice Springs and then on to Darwin. On the first leg back to Alice, the aircraft flies fairly low over the terrain and you can quite clearly see the salt flats that were a major barrier to the early explorers of the Australian interior on their journeys

from the east coast. And you can certainly see why. The Australian interior was once an enormous inland sea which laid down vast areas of salt flats as it dried up, leaving a very hostile environment for mammals, including us humans, to live in. But it is a thing of great beauty when viewed from the air. I was cursing the aircraft's reflective glass windows for spoiling my attempts to get a half decent photograph, a once-in-a-life time opportunity thwarted.

I cannot leave this part of my story without recording my impressions on the position of the original inhabitants of Australia in this strange 'modern' world in which they now find themselves. This was the first trip to Oz where we met or even saw any locals. And I think that says it all. You just do not meet any of the original inhabitants involved in the normal run of the mill interaction you would expect to have as a tourist, such as serving you in a shop or restaurant. I got the impression that they are drifting around in Australian society as observers and not participants, even to the extent that they have their own townships set apart from the rest of the population. It reminded me of the hill tribes in Thailand and Southern China although here there is no 'museum' air to the townships that you see in South East Asia. A people keeping their pride but struggling to survive against the onslaught of the invaders. Not one of the British Empires success stories, a very real tragedy in fact still being played out.

[Blog Entry for Gek's Faces Installation- 2014](#)

Gek's Exhibition



Once back in Penang, Gek and I set about preparing in earnest for Gek's October 'Faces' exhibition in the Luma gallery in Georgetown's Whiteaways, the old Whiteaways Departmental Store building. This was a load of fun as can be seen from the Blog entries. The exhibition was on for three weeks, Wednesday through to Sunday, with Gek and I in attendance each day the gallery was open.

'Faces' was about our understanding that race is a human construct and the divisions it causes are a tragedy. Living and working in seven different countries as far apart as Ghana, Singapore and Mongolia, I have come to the view that we are all the same, even down to the issues that family members have with each other and individuals with differing personalities. Although I was sometimes not able to use language to communicate directly with the people I met and worked with, I was still able to read their body language and correctly too. For instance, in work-based meetings I could most times read other participants reactions to the proposals I might be making, even though they were communicated in Mongolian, let's say. If we humans can evolve beyond the tribal mindset we have inherited from our ancestors, there is hope for us yet!! Our brains are all wired the same way, only our physiology differs slightly.

Japan

[Blog Entry for Japan - 2015, July](#), and [August](#), [September](#)

This was our last trip out of Penang before we left SEA for Wales, this time in the company of Mary-Ann and Alice, our two lovely friends from Singapore. I am going to leave the detail of our journey across Hokkaido to be told by the blog entries and just record here my overall impressions of our three weeks stay in Japan. It is a very strange place, seemingly cut off from the globalisation that is affecting the rest of human society. There are very few foreign manufactured products on sale, even in the main city on the island, Sapporo. We hardly saw a foreign made car or chocolate. There was very little foreign news on the television, adding to this feeling we had that here as a country deliberately setting itself apart from the rest of the planet. The position of women and children in Japanese society certainly seems to be out of step with countries in the 'West'. Child pornography was only outlawed in 2008 and there are still child porn videos sold openly in sex shops, which I personally found very surprising if not a little disturbing.

The much-vaunted Japanese curtsy is also suspect. Entering any shop and immediately the person at the till says exactly the same words of greeting robot like, in every establishment, irrespective of the company name over the door. This happens even if the cashier is in the middle of serving another customer. Needless to say, after a week of this it became very, very irritating.

Preparing to Leave Penang

Well, having ticked all the boxes on our bucket list of things to do and places to visit before we left South East Asia, the time came around to move on yet again and set up a new home, this time in Hengoed, South Wales. The fifth change of country in the last ten years.

The most important piece of paper to get for this move was the UK spouse's visa for Gek's entry to the UK. This visa would allow us to start the five-year process to obtain the all-important 'Indefinite Leave to Remain' which would allow Gek to stay in the UK as long as she wanted to. The paperwork for the application, including all the evidence to support it, filled a box file, so punctuated were the UK Border Agency requirement. The papers were sent to the British Embassy in Manila for the 'yes' or 'no' decision to be made on Gek's application. The day after we knew that the papers must have arrived there, we got an email to say that a decision had been made. Just that. A decision had been made, but no indication whether it was a thumbs up or a thumbs down. How cliff hanging is that? We, of course, thought the worst. How could they have made a 'yes' decision in under 24 hours from first receiving the stack of papers we had sent them? They couldn't have possibly checked through them all in such a short time. Well they did and they had. When we finally got the snail mail delivered 'application approved', it clearly had been a no brainer for the assessor.

Now it was game on for our move to Wales.

Postscript

It has been an interesting and introspective experience, writing about my past. One wonders if the views expressed in these pages are the same as those I would have expressed at the time I was writing about. Was I the same individual in all my 'Seven Ages'?

The other question to answer is the one I posed on the first page of these stories. How did I get from a grimy Lancashire mill town to a Welsh hilltop via Ghana, Wales, Singapore, Italy, Mongolia and Malaysia? It isn't as if I had a plan, quite the opposite. The only reasonable answer I can come up with is that I took full advantage of the opportunities for change that came my way, sought and unsought.

Of course, it is not over yet. The next chapters are still being written on the Blog.

Love,

Granddad Whitworth

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