

## On My Mind

9/27/02

This time, in returning from my annual journey to the mainland to visit family, I returned via Greece and Singapore. One of the things that struck me, as I arrived back in Saipan, is that the CNMI is not nearly as friendly to its tourists as other countries are. There is, first of all, that long, long, long hike from the Northwest gate in the new wing to Immigration. If you're not young and healthy (as I am not), and traveling light (as I was not) the walk is downright punitive.

There's no sign that there's an elevator to get from the aircraft door to the ground floor. And there is not even a courtesy phone so one can call for help, much less is there access to travel carts - which might have helped make the trek somewhat easier.

<br><br>

Other airports provide "moving sidewalks" over such distances. If the CNMI can't afford to do that, it could at least try to compensate in other ways. But it doesn't.

<br><br>

At Immigration, the inspector booths are labeled "citizen" or "non-citizen" - only in English, only in the Roman alphabet. I hadn't really paid attention to that before, but coming from Greece, which uses non-Roman characters for its alphabet, as do the Japanese - and watching bewildered Japanese try to figure out which line to get into - that too struck me as not very friendly to tourists. Both Greece and Japan provide signs in English at their airports. Not that I'd expect signs in Greek, but shouldn't the CNMI provide signs in Japanese, language of our largest tourist market? Money spent by the MVA to pay someone to wear a panda head and wave at incoming tourists would be far better spent, it seems to me, accommodating Japanese tourists - and businessmen - by providing informational signs they can read.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

Another place where signs in Japanese are conspicuous by their absence is in the CNMI Museum. The Greek museums we visited all dealt with aspects of Greek history and culture, but so that others could learn of their culture, all the signage was printed in English as well as Greek.

The CNMI's museum, on the other hand, contains exhibits related to Japan as well as Chamorro and Carolinian history and culture, but its signage is only in English. Nothing is provided in Japanese, not even descriptive pamphlets. Admittedly, nothing is provided in Chamorro or Carolinian either, but it seems fair to say that most island residents have far less difficulty reading English than do most Japanese tourists.

<br><br>

This is not to criticize the current curator, who has done a marvelous job of re-organizing and rationalizing the museum's exhibit space, as well as obtaining and adding to the displays many rare pictures and enriching artifacts.

<br><br>

Given the museum's limited resources, however, it would behoove the museum board to make every effort to find a sponsor willing to underwrite the cost of translating the museum's signage into Japanese. The museum could be a major tourist attraction - and enhance the understanding of CNMI history and culture - if only the tourists had access to the information it contained.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

Singapore was only a four-hour layover on this trip, but Greece was a stopping point. Oddly enough, there were no forms to fill in before landing, and neither immigration nor customs lines to go through on arrival. The contrast with America's paranoia was interesting, to say the least. During our stay, we visited several of the Greek islands in the Aegean. Not one asked for proof of citizenship, or a statement of purchases.

<br><br>

The difference in attitude makes for interesting conjecture. Greece, after all, is barely a thousand miles from Saudi Arabia. Yet there did not seem the preoccupation with security, with "evil," with terrorists, that has become the mantra of the U.S. In fact, we sat at a sidewalk café one evening in Athens, and watched undisturbed as an Israeli VIP, only loosely guarded by uniformed police and business suit-clad security guards, got out of his limousine and walked by about 20 feet away to enter an outside concert stadium. Is it possible that the entire American nation is being traumatized by the megalomaniacal paranoia of its president?

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

From that perspective - to the extent that the Greek attitude is typical of other European nations - it seems silly for the U.S. to be as neurotic as it seems to have become about the danger of further terrorist attacks in the U.S. Inefficient as the U.S. security forces are said to be, one would have expected at least one suicide bomb attack, if not other more aggressive assaults, in the year since 9/11. But not a single one has occurred. To believe that this is only because the U.S. has managed to identify and take into custody every single potential terrorist would be the height of naivete.

<br><br>

Which, in turn, makes the president's determination to unseat Saddam Hussein all the more irrational. As others have said, if a perceived threat is enough justification to invade another country, what is there to stop Pakistan from invading India (or vice versa), China from invading Taiwan (or vice versa) or Russia from invading Chechen?

<br><br>

All of which is to say that even travel for pleasure can bring useful new insights, new perspectives.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

And new experiences. The flight on Singapore Airlines from Athens to Singapore featured personal video screens, on the back of each seat for the passenger in the row behind and with a removable remote control in the armrest, even in economy class. Passengers could use the remote to play video games, choose one of a dozen movies or watch a wide range of shorter videos. And one could flip to the screen which showed the plane's location, speed, time of arrival, etc., at any time during the flight.

<br><br>

For me, it was almost too high-tech. I didn't like the screen in my face. I couldn't make the buttons work right. But clearly, the younger generation had no such problems! Many of their

screens remained lit up throughout the nearly 11-hour flight.

<br><br>

Singapore Airline's stewardesses were uniformly young, slender and very attractive. Obviously, equal employment opportunity laws don't apply! I was also told that the airline hires only locals - those born in Singapore - for the steward/stewardess positions.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

Speaking of employment, what a let-down to come back to headline stories of the CNMI's legislature once again acting as a government employment-protection bureau, more concerned with making sure all the members' friends and family have and keep government jobs than with seeing to it that government operates efficiently and effectively.

<br><br>

In the first place, the CNMI's economy will never recover if the legislature insists that government remain as over-staffed and bloated as it is now. In the second place, neither will the CNMI government function effectively if the members of the legislature insist on micro-managing executive branch agencies instead of doing what they are supposed to do - enact properly-written legislation that provides leadership and guidance.

<br><br>

Nor should the legislature cede to the Governor the ability to appoint directors within departments. The Governor is free to appoint as department head whomever he wishes. But that's as far as his authority should go. It only ties the hands of the department heads if they then can't designate their own subordinates, if their deputies answer not to the department head but to the governor. The position of Governor should not be used as an employment bureau either!