

1 TRAVELOGUE - HOLY LAND

This took seed about 4 months ago when we found that across the street from our house in Tanjay was a travel agency owned by Lisa's nephew that was advertising an 11 day tour to Egypt and Jerusalem at a price almost 60% of what we had missed out on from NJ a year earlier. The brochure was very enticing: class hotels, touring bus with guide, most meals covered, etc. And to us, the clincher was that being a Filipino group, it would probably be safer from possible terrorist attacks than if it had been American. So we signed on. I enticed my 90 year old Ma to come along, too. Then we went off to the US for two months, and between emails and calls to Tanjay we were advised of more of the requirements, such as having to surrender our passports to the Egyptian embassy for visa stamping for a couple of weeks, submitting our birth certificates, and most puzzling of all original marriage certificate. At first I thought Egypt must be strict for traveling co-habiting couples. When we got back to Tanjay early October, it was just a week more before the deadline for submitting all the documents and payment for the Sept 10 departure. We did so hurriedly, despite our trepidation of surrendering our precious US passports.

Then my Ma backed out after her doctor advised her, and in retrospect, it was a wise move. It was also only then that I realized that this was a religious pilgrimage; the name of the tour was "Following the Footsteps of Jesus"; from Egypt to Jerusalem to Bethlehem, to the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, etc. It also included a trip to St Catharine monastery near Mt Sinai where Moses got the Ten Commandments. And there would be a priest in the tour, so when finally in Cana, he would remarry all of us! No wonder the marriage certificate.

I conjured up a might-have-been comparison for last year's pilgrimage we skipped: it was to have been with 2 other Tanjayanon couples from LA, and would have been graced by that well-known Brazilian singer who entertained and impressed the late Pope by his singing and guitar performance using his feet; he was a Thalidomide baby. I always wondered how we would have shared meals.



This group picture was taken in Bethlehem at the church built over the manger. Our tour guide was Filipina, at extreme left.

We also found out that the main travel agency was Cebu based, and that on the Saturday before departure, there would be a briefing for all the "pilgrims". We invited Lisa's close

barkada of two nieces and a cousin to join us for an overnight Cebu trip. I drove the van, crossed over to Cebu via ferry, and proceeded northward to the city, checked ourselves into two rooms at a good hotel, then at the girl's request, dropped them off at the huge SM mall to while their time as we attended the meeting. Since it was early afternoon, I took the opportunity to drive around and show Lisa many of the old haunts I knew from 50 years back. Coincidentally, the briefing was a block away from where my folks used to stay. Every place in that area was highly commercialized, but our old house, located in a dead end alley, was still standing.

The briefing went well. There were only 6 couples, all of our age range, and one mother and daughter pair, plus the directress of the tour and the priest, a total of 16 people. We got back our passports, birth and marriage certificates, and got our plane tickets and the usual paraphernalia of a tour bag, ID tags, streamers, etc.

All the couples were Cebuano. Only one couple were retirees from the US like us, and although they originally hailed from Bohol, they had settled in Cebu. What we gathered as we got more familiar with each other was that another couple were retired UP Cebu professors, with the wife a PhD; another couple were in business and the husband was once in Saudi as a camp manager; a couple whose husband took early retirement from the local utility company and has extensive commercial rental property; the only non-retired couple were both still working for the Central Bank; and the youngest in the group at 32 years was a doctor of medicine, married two years, traveling with her mother who obviously have traveled extensively. The directress, and the priest, were originally from Iloilo but were based in Cebu for many years already.

The Cebuano accent pervaded my ears, and I deliberately shifted to dropping the "i" sound and using the Cebuano words such as "parat" instead of the "asgad" to describe the saltiness of Israeli chicken.

Our Manila trip for the Sept 8 Saturday UPSCA reunion turned out to be more like a layover for us because the next day, we flew to Cebu in the afternoon for the early 1:00 morning Monday flight to Doha, Qatar on Qatar airlines, where we had an 8 hour layover before connecting to Cairo, Egypt. I had researched the airline and the weather beforehand: no shoestring operation this airline; all modern. And the weather was a sizzling 40 deg C. Happily, the Doha airport was modern and well air conditioned and was one big internet hotspot, so we could catch up with email. I did a Google Earth search and figured out how come we had to deplane out in the desert (see picture) and be bussed-in a few kilometers to the main terminal: we had landed in a new runway, and the new construction abuilding all around must be a grander terminal or extension.



To be continued