

By Anna Vivienne

STEPPING on the tarmac of the Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport in Southern China will not make you feel like you are in foreign land.

At least that's how I felt during a recent visit to this city located in a strategic area of that country being a gateway to many other destination in that region.

My slight disappointment stemmed from the fact the people looked the same as us and that the language was very familiar. Chinese...duh! I even speak a smattering of the language!

And then again, what did I expect when I visit China. It could'nt very well be Mandingo with a dash of Eskimo, right?

The first scene that hit me was a woman, standing on a road divider, who was shouting into a cell phone. She seemed to be on the verge of tears. She must either be an irate tour coordinator whose schedule was thwarted by circumstances or she was stood up by a date.

Anyway, the airport is 35 kilometers from central Shenzhen and my eight fellow travellers and I had to take a van to our hotel. The ride cost 400 yuan. That was quite cheap, if we convert it to Ringgit. The hotel that we stayed in was located on a shop lot and was only moderately clean. The service was not anything to shout about either. The receptionists were not helpful nor were they polite but this could be due to language barrier. One of us was quite fluent in Mandarin, but it could be the accent.

Anyway, when we checked in, the rooms were not made yet. And despite earlier bookings, the rate was higher than agreed upon previously. So we stayed a night and checked out the next day. The second accommodation was better as it was an international hotel. Although the receptionists, concierges and floor managers were only borderline polite and the service was below five-star, it was much better than the first hotel.

The rooms were clean and the bellboys obliged when we requested for our luggage to be placed in the rooms.

They demand a tip though. This is rather interesting as in Sabah, we don't expect tips and if our customers insist, we accept very reluctantly. We get salaries as bellboys and as such it is our job to carry people's luggage. If they tip us, it is a bonus. So when a particular bellboy chased us until the parking lot for his 'tip-

p'o' I was quite amused.

This hotel was quite near to the Luohu Commercial Centre, just outside the Luohu Immigration Control Point.

The commercial centre or shopping centre, as we put it, was huge; five floors of shops selling every goods one can think of. There are also smaller shops nearby selling the same kind of wares.

The shopping complex housed various types of shops, ranging from DVDs, cell phones, ipods, computers and electrical goods.

There were also designer goods, like handbags, shoes, dresses, watches and wallets with brands like Louis Vuitton, Calvin Klein, Gucci, Nikes and Rolex among others. Carry bags and trunks were strewn all over the area, well, almost. You literally trip over them.

There were also handicrafts like fans, bracelets, rings and necklaces made from jade and similar type of materials.

Shopping haven for shoppers, indeed. But there is a technique to shopping in Shenzhen, if not in China as a whole. You have to outbid the sellers, in lessening the price of the goods that is.

They would start very high. A handbag with a Louis Vuitton brand for instance would start at 380 Yuan. If you buy it for that price, more fool you.

You could actually walk away after paying 100 Yuan for that, or maybe less.

A 400 yuan leather shoes could actually be yours for 150 yuan, as will a Rolex watch for 50 yuan.

The skill is to give your lowest bid and wait for the seller to come down. If she doesn't, just walk away. If the price was agreeable to her in the first place, she will come after you with a 'aiya...take ... take...I lose, never mind.'

Before buying however, browse first. This was an initial mistake my friend and I made. We bought the initial items we saw and regretted it later when we saw the same goods but better made and better priced. If nightlife is a must to you, we saw several karaoke lounges in Shenzhen as well as nightclubs. There were massage parlours too. If you are in Shenzhen and want to relax you can visit those, but you have to be very careful or you may be unfortunate enough, or fortunate, depending on how you look at it, and land in a prostitutes' den.

The 'pleasure' trade is very much alive and well in Shenzhen, with 'mummies' waiting for potential customers outside hotels.



The buildings as seen from a theme park



The international airport



Shenzhen international airport

Summing up Shenzhen is actually not easy, especially when, like me, one have only a week to savour and evaluate it.

As a tourist destination, China's Guangdong province, situated immediately north of Hong Kong, China's first and most successful 'Special Economic Zone' is a must visit.

It is worth considering that this region was a fishing village in the 1970's, but have turned into a booming metropolis in

about three decades after foreign nationals invested substantially in the construction of factories as well as joint ventures, there. As it is southern China's major financial centre, Shenzhen is home to the Shenzhen Stock Exchange as well as the headquarters of numerous high-tech companies. Shenzhen is also the second busiest port in mainland China, ranking only after Shanghai.

Yes, Shenzhen is worth a second visit.



Scenic Shenzhen with gentle hills



Rive development in the countryside of Shenzhen

A sojourner's tale