



Paul Niel From Tai Mo Shan to Chomolungma

I was huddled in my small, yellow tent, almost 8,000 metres above sea level on the South Col of Mount Everest. Outside a harsh storm was blowing, the cold winds beating against the tent poles, trying to break them apart. My tent mate, Knut, from Norway, was rolled up in his sleeping bag, resting. It was impossible to fall asleep – the noise of the wind was rendering any attempt useless. Just ten hours earlier we had been forced to abort our first attempt at reaching the top of Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world. A few hours short of the summit, as we teetered on a snow ledge known as the Balcony, the storm had become too intense, the severe temperatures freezing our equipment. Every step turned into a hellish fight against the wind – and that was just on the way up. The weather had reached a point where it was better to turn around and live to tell the tale, rather than continue any further attempts and risk the chance of never returning. Sitting in my tent I let my thoughts wander, searching for that moment when I had decided to put myself in this situation, and the series of events that had led me to this camp, way up high on the face of Everest.

It was a Sunday morning, somewhere on the Western slopes of Tai Mo Shan (literally translated as "Big Hat Mountain"), the highest peak of Hong Kong. I was out trail running, a sport I had enthusiastically picked up ever since moving there. Pushing on up the steps, I could feel my heart rate reaching its maximum and an ensuing nausea started to kick in. Although I had considered climbing the Himalayas before, I had never really felt up to the challenge of the formidable peaks of South Asia. And that despite having conquered the highest peaks of South America and the European Alps. However, that morning, as I put my heart and soul into the pursuit, I was suddenly struck by the thought: "If I can do this, then why not climb the world's highest peak?" It was clearly a state of overexcitement, as the comparison fell rather short. Climbing the 957 metres of Tai Mo Shan's green country parkland could hardly be akin to Everest's 8,484 metres of challenging cliff faces, demanding ice falls, and wild weather fluctuations with bitter cold temperatures. Nevertheless, after 13 months of endless trail runs, hikes and climbs in the New Territories, I found myself in Nepal, on the slopes of Chomolungma, the Goddess Mother of Earth, as Tibetans call Everest.



Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's highest mountain

After eight weeks of acclimatisation at Base Camp and several climbs in the surrounding valleys, I was finally given the green light to head for the summit.

But as I sat curled up in a tent, surrounded by canvas walls, which had become home over the past few months, it looked to all intents and purposes as if the expedition had failed. Outside the storm was still raging. Frustrated, I shuffled into my sleeping bag and closed my eyes, trying to block out the howling winds. When I opened them a mere three hours later, the high wind gusts had died down. Peering out from the tent, the night sky was filled with glittering stars.

Brigitta Blaha

Brigitta Blaha is an Austrian career diplomat. She studied law at the University of Vienna and received a postgraduate diploma from the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna. In 1978 she joined the Austrian foreign service and went on her first assignment abroad to the Austrian embassy in Washington. From there she moved to Bangkok, later to Rome and Tokyo where she served as cultural counsellor. In 2001 she became Consul General in Hong Kong followed by Consul General in New York. Her current position is in the Ministry for European and International Affairs as head of office for Austrian abroad.

Austrians Around The World

It is a great honour to have been invited to contribute to this new edition of Servus Hong Kong. I still remember all the hard work involved, but at the same time we thoroughly enjoyed putting together the first edition in 2004 when I was Austrian Consul General in "Asia's World City".

In the meantime, I have worked as Austrian Consul General in the "Capital of the World", New York City, and subsequently returned to the Ministry for European and International Affairs (former the Ministry for Foreign Affairs) in Vienna, where I presently head the office for Austrians living abroad (Auslandsösterreicher/innen).

However, Hong Kong and its Austrian Community have never left my heart; therefore I am delighted to be part of this project again.



At present, there are around 550,000 Austrians living around the world. Almost half of them, 240,000 in Germany; 60,000 in Switzerland; 44,000 in the US; 25,000 in the UK; 20,000 in South Africa; 15,000 in Australia; and 10,500 in Spain.

All these figures are estimates, since there is no obligation for Austrians living abroad to register. However, the Ministry for European and International Affairs encourages all Austrian citizens to do so at Austrian embassies or Consulates General located at their place of residence. This does not only allow for sharing regular information about current events, changes in legal regulations, dates of national, regional or European elections as well as assistance in case of natural disaster or political crises. It also allows for sending out invitations to cultural and social events, thus contributing to create useful and friendly networks.

In many places, Austrians have established associations, as well as friendship societies with their host countries. Many of them are members of an umbrella organisation, the Association of Austrians living abroad, or the Auslandsösterreicher-Weltbund (www.weltbund.at)

Let us briefly look at the history of Austrian emigration:

In the 19th century, the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy was, alongside Italy and Russia, the most important country of emigration in Europe. Emigration mainly occurred due to poor economic conditions and was only limited by military duties. A large number of people went to countries overseas; between 1876 and 1910 about 4.3 million people emigrated; about half of them to the US, while others' emigration destinations included Argentina, Canada, Brazil and Australia. The governments of both Austria and Hungary were concerned - since many emigrants were young and fit men of working-age - but initially didn't question the reasons. There was certainly a connection between industrialisation, rural depopulation and migration. From 1901 to 1905, about 65,600 real estate properties were sold at public auctions. Emigration spread to all provinces, but especially the Southern part of Burgenland was affected, as more than 20% of the population left their home.

After WWI, another wave of emigration during the 1920s could be observed; clearly due to the difficult economic situation which culminated in the global economic crisis in 1929.

Emigration due to political reasons started during the instable period of the 1930s and tragically heightened in 1938, when many Jews and other groups persecuted by the Nazi-regime were forced to leave Austria. Most of them went to Great Britain, France, the US and Israel. After WWII, Australia, Canada and the US became the preferred countries of destination.

Today we can hardly speak of emigrants in the traditional sense. Fortunately, Austrians are no longer under constraint to leave their home country for economic or political reasons, nor religious or ethnic discrimination. Few people take a premeditated decision to settle forever in a foreign country. Primarily it is for reasons of education, job opportunities or family ties that Austrians move abroad. And that doesn't always imply for the rest of their lives. Many move on to another country or return to Austria, when their situation changes. The world has become mobile and global.

The Austrian community abroad is often called "das Zehnte Bundesland" (the tenth province, in addition to the nine existing Austrian provinces), a term created in 1955 by the Austrian Karl Bambas in Rome, Italy. Who are these Austrians abroad? They come from all walks of life - entrepreneurs, investors, bankers, lawyers, doctors, hoteliers, scientists and scholars, artists, athletes and others. Many have become very successful and prominent. Numbers increase every year and Hong Kong is a good example - in the last ten years, the number of Austrians registered with the Austrian Consulate rose from 440 to around 600; and these are only Austrian passport holders. If we included "Herzenösterreicher" ("Austrians by heart", i.e. family members and people with a strong connection to Austria through work, education, etc.), the number would even be higher. At the 13 diplomatic and consular missions in Asia, around 6,000 Austrians are currently registered. Hong Kong occupies one of the top places.

The Ministry for European and International Affairs tries to keep in touch with Austrian communities abroad and provide information and services and at the same time offer a platform for networking. This has become ever more important, hence we increasingly use websites, e-mail, mobile phone messages and social media for communication. Priorities and needs are of course different for each place. Austrian embassies and Consulates General play an important part in our endeavour. They follow our guidelines, but at the same time they are our antennas and feedback their observations and suggestions to us and how we could improve our services.

Ten years ago, I wrote: "The Austrian community in Hong Kong is well established, respected and active in Hong Kong society." I believe this is still the case and I hope this will continue to the next edition of Servus Hong Kong and beyond!



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Joerg Winter graduated from Vienna University 1997 with a Bachelor's degree in Geography. He received a Fulbright Scholarship and graduated from New York University (NYU) in January 2000 with a Master degree in journalism and mass communication. He joined Austria's Public Broadcaster (ORF) in 2000 and has since covered foreign news in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iran and many more countries. He was based as correspondent in Washington DC between 2006 and 2009. Since December 2010 Mr. Winter is head of ORF's Beijing Bureau.



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From the Fragrant Harbour to the Forbidden City

There are days in life that are deeply imprinted in your personal memory and thus never get lost. One such day was my first arrival in Hong Kong in January 1997. I was a student, 24 years old. I had a window seat on a British Airways flight from London. My first impression of Hong Kong were the roofs of life-bustling Kowloon, traffic jams, masses of people that looked like tiny but rapidly moving dots from less than 100 metres above. How can a plane land here, I wondered, before all of a sudden the rows of endless roofs and neon-signs faded away. Within seconds the BA jumbo touched down on the runway of old Kai Tak Airport. Modern frequent travelers would not even mention this. But for a 24-old boy, having grown up in the Austrian countryside, that was already pretty thrilling. Here I was, for the first time setting foot on East Asian soil. It was a rather damp and cool day in Hong Kong. I took my suitcase and tried to find a bus that would take me to some address north of Tsim Sha Tsui. When I stepped out of the bus I noticed an exotic smell of street-kitchen fumes, spices and car exhausts. All this mixed with dampness. And it was noisy. Noisy but full of life. I already like it, I thought, while looking for my little guest room that I had booked over an agency. It was cheap, the right thing for a student on a budget. Or so I thought. Later I found myself in a moldy, cramped building. I could only open my suitcase on the bed. No other space in the tiny room. My first companions in Hong Kong were two huge cockroaches which I chased for hours. I moved out the next day after a sleepless night.

Here I was again out in the street with a suitcase and no idea where to go next. Someone told me about guest rooms at the infamous Chungking Mansion complex. There I stayed for the next three months. In a Filipino-run guest house on the 11th floor. Small but no cockroaches. I was ready to start my research project for my university thesis. I spent long hours at the library of Hong Kong University. I sent questionnaires to companies. I did what was expected of a student writing his final thesis. And I had plenty of time to explore Hong Kong. This is when my personal love-affair with this thrilling city began and my interest for Greater China emerged.

16 years later, I find myself working in China as correspondent for Austrian Public Television and Radio. Journalism is my passion, East Asia a source of continuous fascination and Beijing my new home. A lot has changed since then. Hong Kong is now part of China, which has become the economic success story of our generation. Beijing, now the capital of an again self-confident nation, has changed beyond recognition.

And still, at times both cities seem to be far apart. Some may even feel that the gap has been widening. The fact that some demonstrators in Hong Kong could be seen waving the Union Jack sent shockwaves through the mainland. Stories from mainlanders about being treated like second-class tourists in Hong Kong led to furious comments in the media. It culminated in a way when Kong Qingdong, a professor at renowned Beijing University, launched a tirade against Hong Kong residents calling them "bastards, thieves and dogs of British imperialists". This is an extreme view and also received a lot of criticism in mainland online forums. "We admire Hong Kong people for what they have achieved. Whenever I travel there, I see a modern version of China", a friend in Beijing once told me. Only to add, "but that they are unfriendly and just want our money, that is despicable." I have heard this view many times over.

But to be honest, mainland people most of the time have different things to worry about. How to deal with rapid change keeps people busy. The more I think about it, the more I admire the people of my new hometown. Yes, I admire Beijing's people. I admire the cab-drivers who plough through smog-plagued, car-jammed streets without losing their patience. They work double-shifts just to make ends meet. I admire the construction workers from Henan, Sichuan or Gansu provinces who meld the skeletons of ever growing sky-scrapers. 24/7 they build a new Beijing during the brutal winter chill or the scorching summer heat. I admire Beijing's old time residents who will be a minority in the near future because of massive migration from poorer inland provinces. They see their neighbourhoods change and vanish. They are at times forcefully evicted from their houses, often poorly compensated. But they still love their city. Yes, I admire Beijing's people for their endurance, their resilience and last but not least, their unshakable optimism. Compared to Europe, modern China often feels like a powerful anti-depressant.



while hiking in Hong Kong



The ORF crew while filming in TST, Kowloon

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JW in Hong Kong

Life is increasingly easy for us expats in China. Gone are the times when foreigners had to stay in the ghettos of diplomatic compounds, when international schools were as rare as Western supermarkets or decent hotels. It is not that difficult to live in the major cities along China's East coast. At least if you don't mind the toxic air or daily reports about contaminated food. And yes, if you are not a journalist. Reporting the news in China can be a pretty frustrating affair. Ask officials for something and they throw the ball right back at you. "Maybe we can do an interview with you but it is not for sure", is the polite Chinese way of declining the request. "Please get permission from the local propaganda bureau", is a proven way to delay a meeting indefinitely and push away responsibility.

However, in China you are always in for a surprise. When we asked for an interview with the richest man on the mainland, Zong Qinghou, we never thought that he would actually meet us. But the founder of Wahaha, China's leading beverage giant, did. Mr. Zong was open, he did not duck questions and also talked freely about the weaknesses of China's current system. The chain-smoking, witty man, worth US\$12-billion, according to Hurun's rich list, made quite an impression on us. As did his modest appearance. He was dressed in a simple suit which obviously had been in his possession for many years.

But then there are the dark sides when reporting in China becomes nasty. In March 2011 we wanted to cover street gatherings on Beijing's Wangfujing Road. Anonymous bloggers had called for protests in the light of the Arabic uprisings. We could not see any protesters, but instead, hundreds of police. Within minutes, plain-cloth thugs grabbed us and dragged us away from the scene. They did not hurt us but we were scared. Two days later our team was summoned to a police interrogation room and lectured on how to behave in China.

Foreign journalists are not the heroes in this game, however. The heroes are our sources and interview partners, people who can endanger themselves when talking openly to foreigners like us. We had a meeting scheduled at a secure location with a leading member of an underground church in Beijing. Everything was set, five minutes before our contact was supposed to show up at the location, he called us to cancel. The police showed up in force in front of his house and barred him from leaving. How could they have known that he was about to meet us? Either his or our phones, or both, had obviously been wire-tapped.



Visit to the blogger and investigative journalist Zhu Rui Feng in Beijing

China's constitution guarantees freedom of speech, it guarantees a free press. Still, foreign correspondents are under observation, some are threatened, some don't get their visas renewed for writing stories, which the authorities did not like. But in general the central authorities treat us with respect. They treat us much better than local journalists who risk a lot when they speak out. But most don't anyway. Or as Hu Zhanfan, the chief executive of CCTV, China's Central Television, recently put it: "There is no such thing as journalists. Reporters are in fact propaganda workers for the party." Understand? Just in case you thought something different!

Is it all worth it? Most Western journalists reporting from China will ask themselves this question sooner or later. The answer for me has always been "yes, definitely". Quite frankly: if official hurdles, the toxic air or brutal drivers on Beijing's roads get on my nerves too much, there is always Hong Kong to spend a nice weekend. A city, where people queue and international newspapers and foreign books are freely available. A city, that allows its people to speak their minds. I love Hong Kong for its global attitude. Experiencing life on the mainland has intensified this perception. You really start appreciating things once they are not a given any more. I also simply love Hong Kong for its fine scenery, for its outlying islands that invite you for a hike or a swim. Still, 16 years after I first landed there on a damp and cool winter's day, Hong Kong remains my favourite city in Asia. And Beijing my biggest challenge but at the same time a place thrilling like no other in a journalist's professional life. Only in China can you have it both.



smog in Beijing, so hiking in Hong Kong with better air :-)



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