

THE HOTEL ON THE
ROOF OF THE WORLD

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THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

FIVE YEARS IN TIBET

ALEC LE SUEUR

summersdale

To Conny and the Lhasa Loonies

CONTENTS

1 YOU MEAN YOU *WANT* TO WORK IN LHASA ?! 9

2 TOUCHDOWN IN TIBET 37

3 THE SHOCK OF THE SYSTEM 61

4 LOSING FACE 82

5 BANQUET BLUES 106

6 A DAY OFF WITH THE VULTURES 131

7 FROM MISSIONARIES TO MAO TSE TUNG 156

8 THE MISS TIBET FIASCO 181

9 THE RACE TO RESIGN 204

10 HOUSE ARREST 230

11 HIGH SEASON APPROACHES 278

12 OVERBOOKED 278

13 ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST 302

EPILOGUE 333

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

Flight SZ 504 with 83 passengers on board descended through the grey drizzle shrouding Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport. It was the morning of 31 August 1988. The usual close-up view of the thousands of television aerials, atop the dirty skyscrapers of Kowloon, was obscured by a dense fog. The control tower radioed its last message to flight SZ 504 at 9:14 in the morning:

'All clear for landing.'

Kai Tak's runway, a narrow strip of reclaimed land extending across the polluted waters of Hong Kong harbour, was buried deep in the drizzle. Pilot Zhou Feng Li and the five crew who crowded the cabin of the Chinese flight were unconcerned. Kai Tak airport had an excellent safety record. The last accident had been in 1967. Nothing could go wrong.

Flight SZ 504 was destined to change Kai Tak airport's safety statistics as it skidded across the runway, plunging into the murky harbour and breaking apart on impact with the water. Rescue teams were at the scene almost immediately but tragically seven people died: one passenger, and the six crew who had been standing nonchalantly in the cabin without wearing seat-belts.

I sat in the departure lounge of Kai Tak airport on that same day, waiting to board my first ever flight on CAAC, China's national airline, on my first trip into China and Tibet.

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

While they combed the runway for parts of the fuselage of the old CAAC Trident I had a seven hour delay in which to contemplate my decision to work in this country: a place I had never been to, an airline with rather obvious disadvantages and a two year contract in one of the remotest parts of the world.

Just one month earlier I had travelled from Europe to Hong Kong with my short resumé typed out as lengthily as possible and my best English suit packed. I was looking for a job in the luxury hotels of the Orient – reputedly where the finest hotels in the world are found. If I had done my homework properly I would have known that you do not visit Hong Kong in a thick, heavy woollen suit in the height of summer, but it was my first time in the tropics and I had much to learn. Dripping with perspiration from the sweltering, humid heat of Hong Kong, with my sodden suit clinging to my body as if it was made of neoprene, I entered the Holiday Inn offices for the last interview of my trip.

As interviews go it was a disaster from the beginning. I was only there because the helpful gentleman I had seen at The Peninsula had recommended that I see his friend at Holiday Inn, but my heart was not set on it. There is a tremendous snobbery built in with hotel work. For some reason it is assumed that if you work in a five star hotel you are automatically part of an elite upper class of hoteliers who mingle at ease with the rich and famous. As the reason behind my trip to Asia was to continue my career in luxury hotels I was infected with this snobbery and had little interest in working for Holiday Inn.

The high powered air-conditioning in the office swept through my dripping suit and I shivered uncontrollably as

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

I chilled to the bone. The lady conducting the interview was kind enough not to make any comment on this, for which I was very thankful, but from both sides the interview was going nowhere. We chatted for a while. All I wanted to do was to leave this refrigerator room as soon as possible. Even the sticky heat outside would be preferable to freezing in my own perspiration.

I made to leave. ‘Thank you for coming. Don’t call us, we’ll call you,’ said from both sides with polite hoteliers’ sincerity and with smiles all round. As I was leaving the room I casually mentioned that I would love to go to Lhasa, as I had seen a brochure for the Lhasa Hotel outside her office. From that moment my fate was sealed.

‘You mean you *want* to work in Lhasa?!’ was the incredulous response to my passing remark. The door was closed behind me and before I had turned around my interviewer was on the phone to the company’s Vice President.

I had to face him that day, as the next morning I would be returning to my job in Paris. Still wondering what I had let myself in for, I entered his office; an elegant apartment decorated with immense scrolls of Chinese calligraphy. Some of the scrolls had merely a few characters messily swiped over the rice paper with a large brush. It looked to me like the scribbling of a child let loose with a pot of black poster paint. My host, appreciating my observation of the calligraphy pointed out the red chops on each scroll that showed we were looking at works of art from great Chinese masters. From the Chinese writing he read the names out to me and I nodded in admiration of these masterpieces, wondering how much one got paid

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

for producing these things and whether my little nieces could be millionaires before the age of ten.

The Vice President swivelled pensively on his chair: a sumptuous black leather swivel chair, from which he made decisions every day concerning the multi-million dollar Chinese empire of Holiday Inn. This was the person who would decide the future direction of my career. Broad shoulders, a large square face with a mop of grey hair and thin wire-framed spectacles added to his sombre and learned appearance. He nodded for me to sit down and then proceeded to scrutinise me in detail. The intensity of his look and the wry smile on his face were unnerving and, not quite knowing where to look, my eyes darted from his face to the scrolls on the wall, to the spectacular view of Hong Kong from his window.

Crimson and silver taxis edged along the congested streets far below us in a world which was miles away. It is strange to see the world from above. Somehow it is a private place which humans were never meant to see, like the kitchens of a restaurant or the bathrooms of royalty.

Far below, perspiring heads glimmered in the sunlight. Litter and fallen laundry covered every ledge and portico beneath the high-rise. Daylight betrayed the rusting brackets of the neon street signs which crept even this high up the skyscrapers. Unsightly air-conditioning units jutted out of the exterior walls, spewing annoying little drops of water onto the hapless pedestrians far below.

This last thought on the air-conditioning brought my mind back to the present. I was decidedly uncomfortable. My suit had still not dried out, and the Vice President's grey eyes, enlarged by the thick glass of his bifocals, continued to stare at me, penetrating my inner thoughts.

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

After several minutes of silence he tilted back in his chair and spoke with a deep, slow, authoritative voice:

‘So, young man, you are going to be the Sales and Marketing Manager. You are going to spend six months a year in Tibet with the yaks and six months a year screwing your brains out in Hong Kong. How does that sound to you?’

Startled by his own question he jumped suddenly from his chair and nervously asked me not to repeat what he had just said. Trying to regain his composure he sank uneasily back into his swivel chair and gave me some advice on survival in China. He had worked there for many years and was reputed to know the system better than anyone.

‘Be careful,’ he said, ‘it is not like the Western world.’ He paused. ‘When you see a local girl just remember this one proverb: You can’t try the shirt on before you buy it.’

Not really certain what he was on about I nodded in agreement.

‘They will be watching you,’ he continued. ‘Remember, even when you break wind they will know it. Be careful.’

With these last words fixed in my mind and still wondering why I should be buying shirts with local girls, I returned to Paris to hand in my notice.

‘Where are you going Alec? The George V? The Ritz? Back to London?’

‘No, I am joining Holiday Inn.’

‘Holiday Inn?!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why? Which one?’

‘Lhasa.’

‘Lhasa?’ he repeated, looking quizzically at me.

‘Yes. Lhasa. Tibet.’ I answered.

He could barely bring himself to whisper: ‘Au Tibet?! Au Tibet?! Au Tibet?!’.

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

The drizzle and fog at Kai Tak airport had cleared and I watched with a morbid fascination as the airport engineers hoisted the nose of the plane out of the water. I am not a nervous flier but I must admit to being more than a little apprehensive as later that day we took off on CAAC's flight SZ 4401 – over the remains of SZ 504.

I told myself that even CAAC couldn't down two of its own planes in the same day and I closed my eyes to let my mind wonder what the future had in store for me.

Tibet. What had I done? Why was I leaving my comfortable job in a luxurious Paris hotel? Instead of walking the Champs Elysée to work, where would I be now? Why wasn't I returning to the family home in the Channel Islands, where I could be now, with all the love of wonderful, caring parents?

Despite my homesick thoughts I knew that I was doing the right thing. I was 25 years old, single, and looking for a challenge. Paris had become dull and faded. It was time for something, somewhere, new.

Tibet. Images of a land of magic; towering castles, inhospitable mountain peaks, ancient palaces in swirling mists. Yes, this is what I wanted to find. I had not even set eyes on the place but my heart was burning with desire to be there. Some foreigners are drawn to Tibet for religious or political reasons but I was not in search of discovering myself or freeing a country. I was simply out for adventure.

There were no direct flights to Lhasa. All aircrafts had to land and spend the night in Chengdu: the smelliest city of Sichuan where the sun never shines.

Chengdu is the *ccccrrrrrrrrggggggkkkhhhhpt* capital of China. This is not a word to be found in the *Oxford English*

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

Dictionary, so is not much use for Scrabble, but it does very accurately describe the first sound encountered upon arrival in Chengdu. It is one of the national pastimes of China, and you too can try it when you get there. It issues from as far back down your throat as possible, preferably from somewhere down between your toes, then you pull on the back of your vocal cords, involve your nasal passage somehow, bring it all up and give a good wholesome (and as loud as possible) shot on to the carpet. If there is no carpet available, which there often isn't at Chengdu airport, you may try to get it into one of the brimming spittoons which have been placed for your convenience in the waiting rooms.

Having fun? Well wait until we get to some of the other games they play such as the no-tissue-needed-one-handed-double-nostril-fulsome-snort-onto-the-pavement job. When I pointed out that this wasn't a very pleasant way to blow your nose, I had my first lesson in Chinese etiquette. I was told that our Western method of blowing your nose into a tissue and then putting this paper and its additional contents into your pocket is quite disgusting. They do have a point there. In fact a very good point. How did our Western culture ever develop such a habit? Luckily that is the only tissue waste we put in our pockets. It could have been worse. Much worse.

The adventure had started. This certainly wasn't Paris.

Mr Li, who had picked me up at the airport, told me of all the great sights in Chengdu and asked me why I didn't spend a week there on my way to Lhasa. And anyway, what did I want to go to Lhasa for? It was such a terrible place.

Mr Li, from Hebei province in China, was our man in Chengdu. He spoke fluent English and French, had a

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

university degree in mathematics and had a knack of being able to get things done in the most difficult of circumstances. He was hopelessly over-qualified for his job but considered himself extremely fortunate to be in the employment of Holiday Inn Lhasa without being required to work there. His only concern was that his papers were still registered in Tibet and he lived in fear that one day he might be called up. 'I don't want to go there,' he kept repeating, lifting his eyes to the heavens. If there was anything I could do to help him have his papers released he would be most grateful.

Despite Li's enthusiasm for Chengdu, the only point of interest that I could see was the car-wash on the way in from the airport. This was a relatively new concept in China. About two thirds of the way into the city from the airport all cars had to pull off the road into the five lane car wash. Each lane was manned by six people who carelessly sprayed the car with fierce jets of water and scratched it a bit with spiky brushes. Chengdu taxis are not the most robust vehicles in the world and at best you get soaked, at worst the car splutters to a halt with a flooded engine a hundred yards further down the road. Our taxi needed a push to get it going again and although I didn't understand the taxi driver's exact words I certainly understood the gist of what he was saying about the new service. The cost for this obligatory car wash was one dollar. It was explained to me by the cheerful Mr Li that this was a new policy to keep the city of Chengdu clean. This seemed fair enough until Li told me that this was the only car wash in Chengdu, and cars can enter the city as filthy as can be from any other direction.

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

Checking-in at the Jin Jiang hotel I met two Canadians completely covered in luminous waterproofs.

‘Going to Tibet?’ one enquired.

‘Good luck!’ added the other.

Greg and Dave were a two man mountaineering team en route for Everest but instead of being at base camp where they had expected to be now, they were drowning their sorrows in the lobby bar of the Jin Jiang hotel. In return for a rather large fortune paid to the Chinese Mountaineering Association they had found their path to Everest blocked by insurmountable piles of red tape. Greg kept showing me the very costly permit which gave them permission to climb Everest. However, the Mountaineering Association had overlooked the fact that they also needed a permit to enter Tibet.

Their argument, that as the mountain was in Tibet, they could not possibly climb it unless they were allowed to enter Tibet, had not convinced the man at the airport. As he was the one wearing the uniform, it was his word that counted.

We commiserated together over dinner. I thought it would cheer them up if we tried the legendary Sichuan cuisine, renowned for its spices and fire. We were joined by Mr Li who assured us that he knew the best place in town: one of the restaurants along the large open sewer which he had mistakenly identified as Chengdu’s main river. I knew that Sichuan food was piquant but the chef’s idea of hot was clearly different from mine. Li devoured his bowl with enthusiasm. I watched the sweat pour off Greg and Dave after their first spoonful of soup, letting off steam in answer to their day’s frustration. My reaction was no better and soon we were reduced to nibbling raw

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

cabbage – the only ingredient not to have touched the caustic sauce.

With my mouth still on fire I accompanied Li for the customary evening stroll from the Jin Jiang hotel up to the Chairman Mao statue. Mao stood in the twilight with his arm in Communist salute. Lining the road in front of him were hundreds of street vendors flogging paintings to eager tourists. Capitalism hard at work below the great Communist hero.

One night in Chengdu is always too much and so it was with some relief that I was woken by the phone ringing at four o'clock the next morning. 'Your taxi,' said Mr Li over the phone in a surprisingly cheerful voice for such an early hour, 'it's taking you to the airport.'

Some people panic about flying CAAC, about seeing military on the streets, martial law, tanks . . . but I have always maintained that the scariest person in China is the Chinese taxi driver.

They spend their nights chewing garlic plants and practising malodorous grunts.

Never, *never*, sit in the back of the car. Firstly this annoys the taxi driver intensely (and you want to keep him as relaxed as possible). Secondly, he will spend long periods of time driving at 80 miles an hour down small roads, with his head completely turned to the back of the car so that he can grunt something incomprehensible to you and breathe garlic in your direction.

So, instead, make a quick move for the front seat. If you are fumbling around in the dark for the seatbelt, don't bother. There isn't one. It is with some trepidation that

YOU MEAN YOU *WANT* TO WORK IN LHASA?!

you must then prepare yourself for the drivers' death race to the airport.

With one hand on the horn and the other at three o'clock on the steering wheel, so that he could swerve violently to the left or right with the minimum of effort and control, our car broadsided out of the Jin Jiang hotel car park, scattering early morning road sweepers in its wake.

Grey clad cyclists on lightless black bicycles appeared from nowhere out of the grey background mist. We swerved to the left to avoid a certain collision, to find ourselves head on with an approaching car; we swerved to the right to find a man with half a pig on the back of his bicycle staring aghast at us just a few feet in front of the windscreen; an oncoming truck swerved to the right, we swerved to the left onto the hard shoulder, the man with the half pig vanished behind us in the mist, a motor bike without lights appeared coming straight at us on the wrong side of the road . . . and so it continued until we reached the safety of the airport. The usual time for the airport run is 35 minutes but if you have one of the death-race team you can make it in as little as 16.

Once at the airport you are faced with the crush of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of passengers cramped together in a small room, all shouting at the tops of their voices, waving yesterday's boarding passes and ticket stubs at whoever they can. As there is practically permanent fog over Chengdu, flights can be delayed for days – with the consequence that if your flight actually does leave, you often find that it is packed with the passengers of the previous few days and you are left standing there to try again tomorrow.

The only calm that can be seen at the airport is in the

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

airport staff who happily sit in their uniforms behind their desks, reading newspapers and drinking from their jam-jars of tea apparently oblivious to the screaming and chaos all around them.

It is here that you learn your first few words of Chinese. No such thing as *manana* exists in the vocabulary of these people. Here it is simple *may-oh* which means *no*. It is a wonderful word which occurs with increasing regularity with the more questions you ask. It means that there are none of what you are asking for, there never have been any, there never will be any and why did you bother to ask?

Which brings us to the second word encountered: *putchidao*. This means *don't know*. So after you have received the first negative answer *may-oh* and you politely enquire where you may find a better answer to your question you will then be told *putchidao*.

It is very important not to lose your temper at this stage. I have often laughed at other foreign passengers hopping up and down from one foot to another, slamming the counter with their fists, doing facial impressions of beetroots as they contort themselves in rage. Of course it is a completely worthless exercise as the result is still a calm *may-oh* from the airline staff.

I have to admit that I once sunk to these levels and even now it embarrasses me to think that I forgot the system and joined the ranks of the ignorant foreigners who push their blood pressures to the limits.

I was coming back in after a long break. Ccccrrrrrrrggggggkkkhhhhpt all around me at the airport, people pushing and shoving with their days old boarding

YOU MEAN YOU *WANT* TO WORK IN LHASA?!

passes in the usual airport battlefield. After 45 minutes in the melée I managed to squeeze my way to the check-in counter and lift my bags onto the scale.

‘May-oh.’

I could not proceed as my luggage was overweight. An expressionless uniformed staff waved me away to the excess baggage counter.

‘May-oh.’

I could not pay for my excess baggage as the person who had the key to the drawer where the receipts were kept had not turned up to work.

‘Putchidao.’

No one knew when he would arrive and they went back to yawning, slurping from their jam jars and reading newspapers. Back to the check-in counter.

‘May-oh.’

I could not proceed as I had not paid. I returned to the excess baggage counter and, disturbing someone from his read, managed to persuade him to take my money and write the amount down on my ticket.

Back to the check-in counter. The officer took my ticket but ‘may-oh’, I did not have an official receipt so could not proceed further.

Back to the excess baggage counter. The man with the key to the receipt drawer had arrived! But, ‘may-oh’ he could not help me because I did not have my ticket.

Back to the check-in counter.

‘May-oh.’

I could not have my ticket back until I showed him the receipt for excess baggage. My plane was due to leave in 15 minutes and at this moment I completely lost control. The anger of a patient man . . .

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

The swaying, noisy mob parted around me. For a brief moment they were silent, all heads turning to look at this strange, screaming foreigner. But they had seen this many times before and lost interest after a few seconds, returning to their aimless pushing and shoving. The officials remained as inscrutable as ever and did not even look up from the counters where they stayed securely with their jars of tea.

It is at times such as these that you wonder if it was not easier to travel in the days of the ancient explorers, who crossed the Himalayas with great caravans of mules, camels, yaks, with men carrying months of supplies and equipment over treacherous mountain passes with dwindling supplies of fuel and food.

When China expatriates get together, one of the main topics of conversation is CAAC. Everyone has his favourite CAAC story. The other topic of conversation is 'Did you hear about the guy caught in the lift of the Palace Hotel in Beijing?'

For several years in China this was the common knowledge of every expatriate hotelier, from Tianjin to Tibet. An expat staff of one hotel had been caught 'trying on a shirt' with a local girl in the lift of the best hotel in Beijing. This alone was scandal enough, but the most juicy part of the story is how the unfortunate couple was discovered. I had always imagined that the lift door opened at a certain moment, but not at all. Apparently the whole affair was watched on the in-house TV monitor by the entire hotel security staff. According to reliable sources there was a high price put on the video but the tape mysteriously disappeared. Of course the fate of the couple was that he was sent out on the next plane, and of her, nobody had any news.

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

After the ice had been broken by the lift story and the many other variations on the same theme, the tales inevitably turn to CAAC experiences. Everyone has their favourite coming in to land story, the bits falling off story, the near miss story, the deck chairs down the aisle for the over booking story and so it goes on until the Tsing Tao beers have run out.

Frequent travellers to China have renamed CAAC as 'Chinese Airways Always Cancel' or somewhat cruelly there is also the version: 'Chinese Airways Always Crash'.

I prefer calling it by the official title 'CAAC' (pronounced 'cac') which in the French language has a meaning which exactly describes the service.

I have now flown the frightening skies with CAAC so often that I could be a leading member of their frequent flier programme. If they had one. But on that first day I had little idea of what to expect.

'Connections,' whispered Mr Li, were the key to getting through the crowd at the check-in counter. The Chinese refer to this as *guanxi* and it is impossible to arrange anything in China without it. I watched Li dart in and out of the human mass and sweet talk the uniformed CAAC guardian into giving out a boarding pass. He added my suitcase to the Samsonites of a Japanese group so that I had no overweight baggage to pay for.

I was surprised when Li refused money for the help which he had given me. 'Please ask about my papers,' he called out as he dived back into the crowd. I wanted to thank him but he had been engulfed by the mob and had disappeared from sight.

After the crush of the check-in and the departure of the

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

helpful Mr Li, my spirits were lifted by seeing a sign over one of the empty desks which read: 'CHINA SOUTHWEST AIRLINES, NON-NORMAL FLIGHT SERVICE.'

With this intriguing thought in mind I set off to the security check.

As I approached the walk-through metal detector, it suddenly dawned on me that I had forgotten to take my large penknife out of my pocket. It was too late to go back and find my check-in luggage so with a sinking feeling of resignation I emptied the metal objects out of my pockets into the basket at the security counter. The girl in charge was practising her English. 'Money,' she said as she passed my coins over to the other side, 'Walkman. Knife.'

With a pleasant smile she passed everything across the counter.

There were no announcements in English in the departure hall and it is not uncommon for tourists to sit there happily up to several hours after their planes have departed. I had been warned of this strategy, so closely shadowed a Chinaman with the same coloured boarding pass as I had been given, and hoped that this was the Lhasa flight. I couldn't lose him as he was carrying a large bag of garlic shoots which he was taking as hand luggage on to the plane.

After a lengthy delay in the dense smoke of the waiting room an incomprehensible announcement in Chinese blared out over the loud speaker. They do not have volume controls on their audio equipment, only distortion control and this one was on maximum distort. Fortunately, my friend with the garlic shoots and about 150 other people seemed to understand it, as they immediately leapt to their

YOU MEAN YOU *WANT* TO WORK IN LHASA?!

feet and started to crush six abreast down the narrow stairway and into the waiting buses on the runway.

The plane was an even greater shock than the airport: an aged Boeing 707 which looked older than I was. The first thing one notices upon entering the aircraft is an overpowering smell of rotting cabbage and a group of slovenly looking youths dressed in dishevelled uniforms. These are the crew, who have a small tea drinking area which one must walk through to reach the passenger seats.

When you have recovered from the waft of moulding vegetables, you pass through the 'first class' area to the economy seats. In front of you are the 150 people who had run to get the best places. Although seats are numbered it is not taken very seriously and there are often several boarding passes issued with the same seat number. Most of the rush concerns grabbing the overhead lockers.

There seems to be no official policy on the amount of hand luggage which may be taken aboard a CAAC plane. Thus, the only limiting factor is a physical one: how much can one person carry? Small Chinese ladies defy credibility by heaving huge suitcases up and down the aisle. Families of smiling Tibetans struggle relentlessly up the steps with over-stuffed sacks on their hunched backs. Nothing can dampen their spirits as they push their way along the aisle, ready for the next game: squashing the bags into the overhead lockers. You have to be a bit careful as bits of fuselage stuffing and bare wires protrude from the backs of the lockers, which do tend to get in the way. Stewardesses shout and order people about, but nobody listens to them, as they are all too busy trying to cram 20 kilo bags into 10 kilo spaces. Inevitably, several of the lockers will be left open with bags hanging out over

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

unsuspecting passengers. The rest of the luggage is piled up on any empty seats. I once sat next to a basket containing half a frozen pig, which started to defrost shortly after take-off and drip onto the carpet. No one, except myself, seemed at all concerned.

The ceiling tiles hang down slightly and as the plane accelerates along the runway it is always fun to guess how many oxygen masks are going to fall out, amusing the passengers in their seats. Sometimes you only have half a seat belt to hang on to nervously as you watch the poor stewardess who is trying her best to get through the safety demonstration before being bowled off her feet as the plane hits take-off velocity.

To calm the nerves it is always advisable to ask for a copy of the in-flight magazine. To give CAAC their credit this is the best in-flight entertainment available on any of the world's airlines. When I read my first copy I laughed so much I had tears running down my cheeks and the stewardess had to come over to ask me to stop. It is an impressive looking glossy magazine. The gloss is so good that it could have been printed in Hong Kong, but the English can only have come from a person in China who had never used the English language. The result is the best publication in the history of aviation.

There is a wonderful article with the title: 'Youth, Glistening in the Blue Sky' which is dedicated to CAAC stewardesses:

The stewardess of Southwest Airlines must go through four steps, such as hardship, tiredment, dirt, feeling. Beside the quality of general stewardess.

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

Reading further about the four steps does not exactly inspire confidence in CAAC, and the nervous passenger, clinging to his half seat-belt as the plane taxis along the runway, is not advised to read the passage concerning hardship:

Hardship, is obviously observed on flight Chengdu – Lhasa line, plane often bring trouble to passengers with bump caused by airflow, because of dangerous topography and changeful climate. The stewardess must look into passengers, they have such trouble as same as passengers. Stewardess, Ge Ling has had a scar on her head, because of a sudden bump.

But not only do the stewardesses run the risk of injury, they must also keep the passengers satisfied:

Tiredment, that the stewardess is often effected by. Flying thousand kilometers, they service passengers more than fifteen times in passenger cabin with only thirty meters long, they fly four times per day as usual.

And when the stewardesses are exhausted after servicing all those passengers, they still have to face the most difficult task of all:

Disregarding dirt, is a distinguishing feature of stewardess of Southwest Airlines. a passenger had incontinence of faeces, stewardess, Zhu Jiang Yin and Tan-GouPing, helped this passenger without hesitation. The passenger was so moved full of tears.

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

So, no problem if you should have any ‘incontinence of faeces’ troubles – you will be in the good hands of the ‘Youth, glistening in the blue sky’.

A later edition of the in-flight magazine also confirmed one of my other suspicions about CAAC. I had long maintained that just before take-off, a man went around the outside of the aircraft checking everything with a screwdriver to see that it was all still screwed on. No one believed me, but there in the magazine was proof: a full colour picture of the screwdriver man and his friend, with the caption: ‘Conscientious and meticulous’.

On my first journey I closely followed the work of the screwdriver man, wondering if the heavy engines really were screwed on tight enough. They shook a lot down the runway but were soon shrouded in the thick mist as the 707 struggled skywards.

Twenty minutes after take off the aircraft emerged through the clouds which fill the Sichuan basin. Dawn broke over the cumulus and a rosy pink hue cast across the cloud ocean. China was way below, and there, ahead, above, lay the Tibetan plateau.

Fifty million years ago, or thereabouts, continental plates crashed together here, throwing up the Himalayas. Tibet lay on the edge of the Asian continent, while the Indian continent sailed full steam ahead on collision course, forcing Tibet’s sunbathing beaches several miles into the sky. The average height of the Tibetan plateau is over 16,500 feet (5,000 m) and there are more than 50 peaks higher than 23,000 feet (7,000 m). There are mole hills higher than Mont Blanc. Well, there would be if any moles lived in Tibet.

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

From the aircraft the dawn view of the approach to Tibet is a moving experience. The abrupt geographical line between China and Tibet tells you something about where you are going. You are gripped with a sensation that this flight is not like any other (as if you had not already realised) but this is a flight to somewhere special, somewhere magical, high above and beyond the clouds.

The plateau is deeply cut by twisted gorges between high mountain ranges. Even in this day and age the area is unsafe: outlaws and outcasts eke a meagre existence by the sides of the road cut through by PLA (People's Liberation Army) troops and prisoners in the 1950s. Due to the inhospitable terrain, the road was constructed with great loss of life. Sadly, today it is rarely used, as landslides tear long sections down each monsoon season. The Chinese military keep command of the route and it is rumoured that there are important military posts on the way, tunnelled into the hillsides.

Before the road was built, brigands and bandits inhabited every valley and watched over the remote passes. The French explorer Louis Liotard lost his life in an ambush over one of these mountain ranges. In 1940, his compatriot Andre Guibaut wrote of the furthest Chinese outpost on the edge of the plateau: 'Robbers abound in this frontier town . . . It is quite common at dawn to find people lying stabbed and entirely stripped of their clothes'.

Perhaps CAAC isn't so bad after all.

Thin fingers of deforestation now stretch up the green slopes as trees are felled for the lumber markets of China. This beloved land of the early twentieth century plant hunters, who came in search of the seeds that created many

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

of today's European gardens, is rapidly being carted away to the east, down the shaky PLA highway.

As the 707 toils on above the plateau, the deep ravines become shallow, and soft undulating hills stretch up to rounded snow caps. New roads fan out to reach the furthest tree covered slopes until the landscape changes to rugged snow peaks with bare black rock faces. Glaciers flood the valleys and dazzling turquoise lakes lie in the oval hollows between mountains. How people can survive down there defies the imagination but every so often there is a small cluster of Tibetan houses.

It is normally at this time, with your thoughts far away in the snow peaks that you drift off to sleep, just in time to be woken up by the stewardess bringing along your present. One of the perks of flying CAAC is that you always get a little present. I now have a great collection of them, ranging from: tie pins, belts, bags, table cloths, fans, plastic wallets, key chains, pollen extract, to my favourite – the CAAC postcard collection. One side of these cards have pictures of pretty CAAC scenes: planes flying into the sunset, stewardesses glistening in the blue sky etc. The reverse sides of the cards are taken up with helpful travel tips which are guaranteed to wake you up.

WHAT FACILITIES AND SERVICE CAN BE PROVIDED IN THE CIVIL PLANE?

The washing-room on board are located the front (middle) and back part of the passenger compartment. Please don't forget to but the door when you use them.

On the left hand and right hand sides, there are two emergency exits. Please use only them at emergency situation.

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

During the flight, our crews will serve you with free cold and hot drinks, sweets, newspapers, magazines, etc. as well as delicious food only at meal time.

The cabin is seated by heighten pressure, so please do not knock and carve the window glass in account of your safety. During take off, land or bump of air plane, please fasten your safety belt.

WHY PASSENGERS MUST FASTEN THEIR SAFETY BELTS ON BOARD OF CIVIL PLANES?

Before civil planes take off and land, the hostess always ask passengers fasten their safety belts, Why?

Civil planes, although flying in the air, must depend on the ways to take off and land. During this course the aircrew maybe restricted by some factors, then it's hard to avoid accidents, for example, obstecles on the runway and failure of planes. etc. For these reasons, the aircrew has to take emergency measures, and stop the flight. And then if you don't fasten your safety belts, you'll be injured by strong inertia and resistance of the planes, even though special accidents don't occur.

In order to reduce the air resistance, planes fly ordinaryly above the atmospheric layer. When planes fly through fogs and clouds, serious jolt will occur because of strong air current. At that time, if you don't fasten your safety belts, you'll be injured. Due to igovance of safety many passenger have taken blood lesson before.

So please fasten your seat belt properly for your life safe, when planes take off, land and bump.

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

While passengers are working out how to use their presents and what to do if there should be one of those 'hard to avoid failure of planes' etc, the stewardesses come around with what the CAAC postcard described as: 'delicious food only at meal time'.

Either the person who wrote this had a terrific sense of humour or there is something seriously wrong with his or her taste buds. I suspect the latter.

The meal always comes in a cardboard box which has an imaginative route map on the back with maps of planes going all over China in every direction – even to places where there are no airports. The box contains a greenish egg, a variety of dry pastries with unidentifiable contents and a plastic bag of vacuum-packed pickled vegetables labelled 'CSWA fly food'.

The health warning that CAAC prints in the in-flight magazine, advising passengers not to overeat is unnecessary.

DO NOT EAT TOO MUCH BY AIRPLANE

If you fly with civil airplane, please do not eat too much. On board, there will be a little blood-supply for stomach, then the secretion of gastric juice will be decreased, and stomach peristalsis will be slowed down, which will be unfavourable for the digestion.

In the other hand, much air will get into your stomach, if you eat too much on board. And due to the lower pressure in the air, passengers eating too much will be liable to sickness, vomiting, abdominal distension and pain, etc. It is better that passengers take food one hour before the flight, and only underfed. And do not take food that will produce much air.

YOU MEAN YOU WANT TO WORK IN LHASA?!

Anyone overeating on this food would qualify for CAAC's other travel advisory:

These years, some sick and wounded passengers were critically ill or died on board of airplanes or in the waiting room of airport. Therefore sick and wounded passengers must think that the airport. Therefore, sick and wounded passengers must think that the airplane will be suitable for you.

I must say that there have been tremendous improvements since my first flights on CAAC. The cardboard box now has a seal and a date stamped on it – so that you can check it is on its first flight with CAAC. This prevents problems occurring, such as what happened to a group of tourists who arrived in Lhasa after a short visit to Gansu province. On their way to the city of Lanzhou, a two hour flight from Chengdu, they had received the typical cardboard boxes. Most left the box untouched, one person just had a bite out of his stale bun and tossed it back into the box. Three days later on their return to Chengdu they were presented with cardboard boxes of 'delicious food only at meal time'. Suddenly one of them called out: 'Hey! Someone's had a bite out of my bun!'

Happily the days of the aged Boeing 707's for CAAC's flights to Lhasa are now numbered, as they have finally decided to take them out of the sky before they drop out. For many years Chinese authorities insisted that only planes with three or more engines could fly to Lhasa due to difficulties in landing other types of aircraft at an altitude of 12,000 feet. These apparently conscientious safety regulations were very convenient for CAAC. It just so happened that by a complete coincidence, CAAC was the

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

only airline in the region operating aircraft with three or more engines – their good old Boeing 707's.

In order to convince the Chinese that a plane with less than three engines could land successfully at Lhasa airport, Boeing Corporation flew in a 757 – with the American Ambassador to China aboard. The Chinese requested that the anxious Ambassador, wearing his Victory Desert Storm sweatshirt, be put through a series of one engine landing and take-off tests before placing their multi-million dollar order for the 757's. The Boeing pilots performed superbly and the aged 707's are now being replaced. It has taken some of the fun out of flying CAAC but even if the machines are new, the service has the same charm. The immaculate interior of the new aircraft is rapidly changing in appearance and familiar odours peculiar to CAAC planes are already hanging in the aisles.

On my first flight into Lhasa I had managed to sleep for most of the two hour journey. I was tired after the trip to the Far East from Europe, the one night stopover in Hong Kong, Chengdu and then the early morning departure. Even the stewardesses were asleep now.

For no apparent reason, I woke suddenly from the depths of a dream – where I had seen nothing around me but barren rocks and Chinese soldiers. Regaining my conscious thoughts, I strained my eyes at the window to estimate our position. Way beneath, veins of ocean blue river traced across the white sand of the Tsangpo river bed. Mountain ranges rippled away in waves towards the peaks of the Himalayas. To the south, somewhere beyond the tiny speck of Yumbulagang temple was the mountain kingdom of Bhutan. My head was spinning with questions. Could that

YOU MEAN YOU *WANT* TO WORK IN LHASA?!

mountain be Everest? Or perhaps that one over there? They do tend to look alike when seen from above. Where is Nepal? Where are the boundaries between China and India where their soldiers peer at each other from frozen dugouts?

As my mind pondered on these questions, gazing at the tangled mass of mountains that stretched away into the distance, the aircraft lurched forwards into its descent. The passenger next to me stirred from his sleep. His mouth stretched into a gaping yawn and the pieces of eggshell, which had fallen into the creases of his blue Mao jacket during his meal, now tumbled out onto the floor. They would soon be trodden in to the carpet by the trampling hordes on their way down the aisle. Hundreds of years ago the Mongolian hordes had wreaked havoc on the advanced civilisations of Asia, and soon they would be doing the same to the Boeing 707 carpet.

Tufts of black hair stood up at unnatural angles from the top of his head, where they had been pressed during the two hours that he had slept. His yawn lasted an eternity. His mouth opened so wide that it took up practically the entire sphere of his otherwise featureless face, giving me an unprecedented view of Chinese dental work. Judging by the display of pickled vegetables in various states of decomposition that were caught between his molars, it was apparent that dental floss is either not widely used or simply unavailable in China. I wondered if I had packed any in my 20 kilogramme luggage allowance.

Coming out of his yawn, he squinted to focus on me and seeing that he was sitting next to a foreigner he beamed into a Cheshire cat Chinese smile.

‘Hello,’ I said.

THE HOTEL ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

‘Lhasa!’ he replied, pointing out of the window.

I could see that communication was going to be a problem but at least the Chinese seemed to be friendly people. After reading countless Western newspaper articles about China and Tibet I had been conditioned into mistrusting the Chinese. It was quite a pleasant surprise to find that as long as they were not standing behind a desk in a uniform or working in any capacity, the Chinese were generally extremely likeable people.

‘Lhasa!’ beamed the Chinaman again, pointing eagerly to the floor of the plane. I peered out of the window. Still nothing.