

## **Risky Business**

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Business involves risk. Travel also involves risk. We undertake business travel to foreign countries with anticipation of a reward greater than the risks taken. Sometimes the reward is profit. Sometimes it is knowledge, born of experience.

I have three anecdotes about business travel, one of my father's and two of mine.

In the early nineteen nineties, while my father was still in the scrap business with me, we had an opportunity in Nigeria to buy 50,000 tons of rail scrap originating from the nationally controlled railroad. Glauco Meli, a rotund, thick accented Italian who in addition to trading scrap, we later discovered, also traded military arms, brought this deal to us. Also involved was an Englishman with extensive international business experience. The three of them traveled to Lagos where two colonels in the Nigerian army who were in control of the deal met them. They had arranged for a driver for the three foreigners to travel to various locations to inspect the steel. One day, while passing through a large village, their car was stopped in traffic. My father, seated in the back of the car was snapping pictures of a group of nearby people. He was unaware of the local belief that taking someone's picture was tantamount to stealing his or her soul. The incensed locals surrounded the car and began beating on the roof and doors. The driver rolled down his window to confront the growing crowd. He was quickly met by a punch to the face. After he closed his window the crowd began rocking the car and gathering tires, threatening immolation.

My father was speechless, frozen with fear. Glauco, seated next to the driver, was unable to say anything other than a repetition of the phrase "Oh my God." The Englishman, who was seated behind the driver, started hitting the driver on the back of the head while shouting in perfect English colonial fashion, "Run over the bastards."

Fortunately for the four men stuck in the car, a local police officer came to their rescue with a single question: "How much money do you have?" With empty and unsinged pockets, they were allowed passage.

Even though my father didn't get the deal, he kept his life.

In 1991, we had been selling considerable quantities of copper scrap to China for almost a year. We had over two hundred container loads originating from Finland scheduled to be delivered to Hong Kong over the next couple of months. The copper market suddenly dropped, enough that the Chinese wanted out of the deal. Since they were contractually obligated to buy the material, their only way out was to claim that our material was out of

specification. They refused to receive additional shipments. Our now open position left us with a potential two million dollar loss.

At the time, we had eight containers at the docks in Hong Kong. We were able to convince the Chinese to wire us the funds for the containers before we sent the original bills of lading, an inversion of the standard transaction. We did not send the bills of lading. The next day, with documents in hand and six thousand dollars in my pocket, I boarded a plane headed for Hong Kong to appropriate the containers.

I arrived at 8:30 on a January Monday morning after flying from Cincinnati to Chicago to San Francisco to Honolulu to Guam and finally to Hong Kong. My first call was to our lawyer at Baker & McKenzie to make sure that what I was about to do was legal. The last thing I wanted was to have three squares in a foreign prison. With the lawyer's blessing, I went to the docks. I presented the bills of lading to the clerk. She told me that she could not process the documents without my corporate chop. I was clueless as to what a chop was. I called my lawyer who informed me that it was customary in China to have a stamp called a chop signifying corporate authority. He also informed me that it would take perhaps four or five days to have one made. I called my father at home to report my situation. He told me that his Chinese contact had called him earlier in the day to ask why I was in Hong Kong. I had been there less than a day. That they knew I was there was more than a little unsettling. I began to fear for my safety. I called my lawyer who eventually agreed that the chop was not legally necessary. He called the shipping line and made it clear that they must release the containers to me without the stamp. I went to the docks and booked the containers on the next vessel to the United States.

I headed for the airport to catch the next available flight. I was nervous about whether I would be intercepted by some anonymous official. Upon arrival at the airport, I learned that Cathay Pacific, the largest carrier in and out of Hong Kong had gone on strike. Abandoned passengers became unruly, shouting at ticket agents. This did nothing to calm me. I returned to the hotel.

That evening I went to a pub frequented by expatriates from the English speaking world. I was the only American. During the evening, I spoke with young people from different parts of the globe. The noteworthy fact of these encounters was that I was asked if I owned horses, twice. It turned out that their conception of the United States had been informed by one of our largest cultural exports at the time: the television show Dallas.

Apparently, lack of cultural knowledge is universal.

Fortunately, we eventually settled the copper dispute without loss.

Midway through last year, Bill Sena arrived at lunch with a story about his recent trip to Phuket, Thailand where he visited a martial arts training camp. He described going to bloody and violent fights, held in local stadia. He showed darkly lit video of two men adeptly and aggressively punching, kneeing, elbowing, and kicking each other. He

mentioned a bodyguard who accompanied him on his visit. In all he gave an impression of a darkly violent and dangerous world in which he was now involved.

Over the next couple of months, we discussed the business and its potential for locations outside of Thailand. I met with Will Mac Namara, the founder of Tiger Muay Thai, the training camp in question. Mac's enthusiasm for, and description of, Tiger's position in the world of Mixed Martial Arts convinced me that this venture might be viable. I investigated and found that indeed Tiger was a market leader.

I was interested but hesitant. I have never particularly liked combat sports and at some level have always found them to be base and disturbing. However, Bill's enthusiasm for this business was intriguing. He said that I must see it first hand to understand what he was talking about.

Early in November, Bill asked me to join him the following week to visit Thailand to observe the camp and meet the principals. I prepared myself for fifty-one hours of air travel broken by four days in Phuket.

Most concerning to me was my unsettled feeling of anxiety. Where exactly was I going? I had never been to Thailand. Bill had painted an image of brutality and violence. I imagined scenes of knife wielding criminals lurking in anticipation of foreign targets. I imagined that the poverty might be so severe that I could justify being robbed. I was uneasy.

The Thursday morning flight to Chicago aboard a regional jet included the expected crowded plane with uninterested, if not surly, in-flight service. I lamented inwardly the fact that we would not arrive in Phuket for another twenty-six hours.

The next leg, to Seoul, would take fourteen hours. Being in business class offered the promise of a restful flight, intermittently peppered with conversation, reading, eating and sleep.

Compared to the bus like experience of a domestic Delta flight, Korean Airlines' business class was like a luxury cruise aloft. Each seat was a pod like enclosure in which one could be relatively sealed off from fellow passengers. At the flip of a switch a partition could be raised to block off the glowing wide screen video feed of my neighbor. At the flip of another switch the delightfully wide seat would convert into a fully prone bed.

The stewardesses were well trained, comfort shock troops, each one virtually indistinguishable from the other, hair coiffed uniformly as though each had been to the same hairdresser. Their uniforms were not just of a similar palette, but exactly the same, with skirts so narrowly binding to their knees as to make them walk one foot directly in front of the other. They served with grace and deference, smiling so genuinely that one could believe they were spiritually satisfied to be there at that very moment serving me.

By the time we arrived in Phuket at midnight, I was completely drained of energy and disoriented. It was crowded and chaotic. We went outside to wait for a ride to our hotel. The air was oppressively hot and humid. Neon lights and bright signs offered products and attractions in a script foreign to me, appearing to be a sort of highly stylized doodling.

We drove for a seemingly interminable forty minutes, with the endless passing of dimly lit closed shop stalls, tightly arranged behind infinitely intertwined power and communication lines drooping toward the sidewalks. I stared exhaustedly at the unkempt urban landscape.

We arrived at our hotel, a three story building resembling a hostel more than a hotel, devoid of a front desk or lobby. A woman guided us to our rooms, which were small, sparse, and hot. I rinsed my face and went to bed debilitated by the journey. It was now two a.m. but my body said two p.m. I slept fitfully and sporadically.

At 5:30 I awoke with the sun rising and a rooster crowing. I pushed back the curtains and was shocked to see a farmhouse with a red pagoda like roof next to our hotel. Behind and above it, far in the distance, was a gleaming almost fifteen story tall white marble Buddha atop a mountain. It turned out that we were not in an urban area, but rather a semi rural village.

I went outside where monkeys howled in the forest across the gravel road. After awhile the same woman who greeted us the previous night emerged. The hotel did not have a soft drink machine. I asked where I could buy a Coke. She gave me directions to a nearby convenient mart. I asked if they took dollars. She said they did not. Seeing my disappointment, she handed me Thai Bhat worth approximately thirty dollars. "You pay me back later," she said and smiled.

A couple of hours later, Bill and I headed for the camp, a thoroughly modern series of open-air structures. We ate breakfast at the camp's restaurant. It was refreshing and edifying. The fruits and vegetables were locally grown and delicious. The camp's operations manager greeted us and guided us on a tour of the camp. He was affable, with a ready smile quick to turn to laughter.

The early morning training sessions were active with men and women kicking and punching with the trainers. The slapping of flesh on pads, forceful and focused surrounded us. I watched an extremely fit young man perform a series of rapid-fire kicks, each one of which would have sent me to the ground. His trainer urged him on in Thai, counting the number of kicks. As the boxer reached his fortieth kick, his face in a contorted grimace, he fell to the ground, spent, with a smile broadly in evidence. I noticed the same determination all around me.

That night we dined with Tu, Tiger's legal counsel. Our table, four feet from the beach, provided a view of a bay pocked with fishing boats. Stray dogs circled the sand for

discarded food. The conversation during our multi hour dinner was convivial and engaging.

Bill asked if we might see some fights. Although Tu had not planned on any more than dinner with us, he arranged for us to go to a new stadium in a nearby village.

At nine o'clock, we headed to the stadium where we were ushered into ring-side seats. The first bout started with two boys of about nine or ten years of age. The thought of these boys fighting and bloodying each other was disconcerting. Before the bout, each fighter performed an individually designed dance while sequentially facing all sides of the ring. Music began playing.

Sarama, the music played at all Muay Thai fights, is a rhythmic, mesmerizing, atonal backdrop to the fighters' movements. Along with drums and a chime, there are oboe like instruments that syncopatedly belch out dissonant rasps, single chaotic notes, a contrapuntal cadence, a constrained improvisation. The music's tempo rises and falls in concert with the action of the fight.

The fight began and the boys laid into each other. They kicked at each other's legs and sides. They kned each other in the stomach. They punched and elbowed each other in the head. The crowd cajoled and cheered. I was beginning to feel as though I had indeed found myself in a seedy world of violence. I noticed that there were a couple of women circling the ring with smart phones filming the match. I was told that the two women were the fighters' mothers and that the men in the corners of the ring were the boys' fathers. I began to understand that I was witnessing a Thai analogue of parents attending a child's basketball or football game. Muay Thai is Thailand's national sport and it is inextricably part of the national identity. Tu explained that all children practice Muay Thai. It was also explained that there was very little bullying in Thailand. Children knew how to defend themselves.

As the bout came to a close the two fighters bowed to each other and embraced with smiles on both faces: an after game congratulation. The boys had fought hard but without ire. They were taught to respect the sport and each other.

A few bouts later, a Tiger trained fighter entered the ring. Ana MacSweeney, a short pale twenty something woman from Manchester, England with a tattoo of a pair of scissors cutting a heart was fighting a Thai woman about her size and age. The bout was aggressive, but respectful as with the previous matches. Quickly thrown punches to the face and kicks to legs landed sure and accurate. Ana won by TKO. The two fighters bowed to each other and embraced. Both smiled.

I began to realize that this sport was not a world of overt violence and threat, but rather an out growth of pride and determination. The people training in this camp possess a sincerity of purpose and focus that awe and inspire me.

The rest of our stay was extremely enjoyable. The people were friendly and helpful. My initial apprehensions were unfounded. My personal bias against martial arts proved erroneous.

What becomes of the MMA business venture is unclear at this point. Where in the world will we establish other camps? Perhaps Hong Kong, where I will be sure to bring a chop, or Nigeria, where I will be sure to keep my camera in my pocket lest a police officer ask how much money I have.