



IP Federation Gangnam-style

Covid-19 changed many things, not all of them for the worse. Think of the mass enforced experiment of working from home which to our collective relief was actually quite alright and has proven durable and popular after the pandemic is behind us.

Stopping travel was another change. Personal travel has come back but business travel less so. I finally managed to get to Japan to visit my company HQ in October '22 after a three-year gap. There were few business travellers in my Tokyo hotel and my companions at breakfast were mainly intrepid tourists from France and the USA. There were constant reminders that Covid was still a real threat, from the plastic gloves we were obliged to don before handling breakfast items to the scary public announcements in stations to observe Covid precautions. And wearing a mask all day in HQ made my ears sore!

I was lucky enough to take over as the IP Federation's president at a time when the worst of Covid was behind us. In my mind I would be travelling often for IP Federation, preferably to new and exciting places. The reality was rather different. During my presidential year the furthest I travelled for the IP Federation was to the Welsh Riviera, otherwise known as Newport, Wales, to visit the UK IPO. I don't want to be negative, but it was a bit short of my dream.

But good things come to those who wait, as my mother used to tell me. In July, shortly after stepping down as president, I unexpectedly received a most welcome invitation. It was from the Korean Patent Attorneys Association (KPAA) to visit Seoul to represent IP Federation at a KPAA IP seminar. A new and exciting country to visit after all!

With the seminar date settled and less than a month away I prepared as best I could. I had several calls with the IP Federation's living legend traveller, Tony Rollins, who has been to Korea (and almost everywhere else on the world patent map) several times. Other sources of insight were the *Lonely Planet guide to Seoul* and Alexander Armstrong's TV miniseries which delved into the quirkiest aspects of Korean culture. I remembered the K-Pop craze and noted with satisfaction that my hotel was in Gangnam. AA's experiences of eating live seafood in the fish market reminded me that I might need to rely on a travel skill developed over 30 years of visits to Japan: the ability to eat (almost) anything provided a suitable mouth-flush product (beer, preferably, in case a long flush is needed) is on hand to wash down the various living, poisonous or uniquely textured food item swiftly and free of aftertaste (or fightback).

The flight to Seoul was long but smooth and comfortable. My first task on landing was to get from the airport to my hotel. I'm a firm believer in using public transport in foreign cities and my trusty guidebook declared the system cheap and easily navigable by foreigners. Step 1 was to purchase a travel card. Easy, right? Not so much. It turns out that a travel card can be paid for by debit card but loading funds onto the card requires cash. Therefore, my steps included not understanding what the nice member of staff in the convenience store was trying to explain about cash-only top-ups, allowing a mighty queue to build up behind me in the store during the mysterious explanation, and

heading off to a nearby cash machine. I was too embarrassed to return to the store with my cash and used a top-up machine to finish the job.

My first boss in the patent profession very much liked the expression “classic beginner’s error” or CBE to describe my work. As if the travel card purchase was not enough of a CBE, on my journey downtown I replayed to myself my visit to the cash machine. CBE#2 was an exchange rate error. In my defence the exchange rate is big: £1 is approximately 1600 Korean won (KRW). In my small mind I’d withdrawn about £100 and put £30 on my travel card but during my journey it dawned on me that I’d actually withdrawn the princely sum of £10 and put £3 on my travel card! Frugal but optimistic in London terms. I prepared mentally for a “seek assistance” moment (and further embarrassment) at the exit barrier. When the barrier obligingly opened at the end of my journey, with a few won to spare, I counted my blessings. Seoul truly has a lovely public transport system.

My stay in Seoul was only 4 nights but having arrived on a Saturday afternoon I was able to make Sunday a full sightseeing day, taking in two royal palaces and the famous hilltop with traditional Korean *hanok* houses. Sightseeing in Seoul in August is not for the fainthearted with temperatures above 30 Celsius and humidity levels fluctuating between “oppressive” and “miserable”. One of the highlights was a tour of the ‘secret garden’ of *Changdeokgung* palace. Our tour guide alarmed us at the beginning of the tour by reporting that on her earlier tour of the day some hapless Westerner had fainted. We were told in no uncertain terms to give up now if we thought that might happen to any of us!

Food is Korean is tasty and fun. I’d experienced a Korean BBQ many times in Japan, where it’s extremely popular, but on this visit I was keen to explore other local cuisines. My first taste was *Andong jjimdak*. The sign outside the restaurant gave me some clue as to what was on offer inside: pictures of what looked like bowls of stew and a few words of English translation such as *chicken*. But inside, nothing except an order form in Korean only. Undeterred, I waited for the waiter and uttered a few random words like *chicken, spicy, beer* from which he was able to take care of the order form himself. Chopsticks in Korea are metal and quite heavy, which takes a bit of practice. I learnt quickly to look in the secret drawer of my dining table for the chopsticks.

No trip is complete without a food challenge and on this trip to Korea my moment of challenge came during a lunch with KPAA. I think the restaurant was Chinese but with a few Korean delicacies as bonus items. One such bonus was *hongoe* or fermented skate. This has a purposely pungent smell (think public toilet at high tide) and the eating ritual is to make a *samhap* or “gathering of three” with steamed pork belly and over-ripe *kimchi* to hide the presence of the stinking fish. Assembly of the *samhap* using chopsticks was a bit challenging but I could swallow and flush with beer suitably quickly to survive unscathed.

The people are another great reason to visit Korea, from the hospitable IP professionals of KPAA and KINPA (IP Fed’s counterpart in Korea) to the courteous and friendly hotel staff and taxi drivers.

This trip reminded me why we should continue to travel for our businesses and for IP Federation even if video meetings are the new normal. We are lucky that IP people have a common understanding and an easy, unforced affinity when they meet. There’s no substitute for getting to know each other in the ways you can only do by meeting in person and sharing time eating and drinking together. Here’s to further trips and to the opportunity to welcome our colleagues from overseas to the UK as our visitors.

Matthew Hitching – Immediate Past President
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