

Travel 2008 Cities visited Hong Kong, Ho Chi Min(or Seoul), Singapore

Travel is my passion and whenever I travel, I try to find out the effect global aging is having on different cities around the world. I want to find out the particular strengths and minuses of the places I visit and the impact they have on the senior citizens living there.

I usually concentrate on several objectives.

1. What kind of government and economy does the particular city I'm visiting have? Does it seem to be working for the people living there? 2. What about their growing number of older citizens? How are they being effected by the economy? 3. What kind of services do the frail elderly have, is there family care or institutional care? 4. What are the things about each of the places that I visited that I found most surprising or most memorable? 5. How have these large cities handled particular problems, such as overcrowded roads. Is there something we could learn from other cities solutions to a difficult challenge.

Hong Kong

1. My first stop was Hong Kong which now exists under the Chinese flag as a Special Administrative Region. The policy is called one country-two systems. Hong Kong covers just 116 square miles and has a population of seven million people. It has little arable land few natural resources, but it's the world 11th largest trading entity-with one of the world's busiest ports.

When it comes to the economy, the unemployment rate is a low 3.6% Interestingly all land in Hong Kong is owned by the government and leased to private companies and Hong Kong residents. Prices for food in Hong Kong are higher than China and since China is only a ferry boat ride away, many people in Hong Kong go to China to buy the goods they need.

As far as workers goes, Hong Kong does have a shortage of factory workers, particularly in the apparel industry. Also Hong Kong like so many other countries, has an economy that is developing into one that's based on knowledge, and there is currently also a shortage of highly educated and skilled workers.

3. The percentage of elderly people in Hong Kong has increased from 13% in 1991 to about 15% in 1996 and is expected to rise to 20% by 2011. Traditionally the frail elderly were cared for by family members in their own community. Now because of smaller families, family members emigrating, the need for family members to work, and there

being inadequate space in their homes to take care of their elderly parents, there is a growing demand for a range of residential care facilities.

There is presently a shortage of public residential facilities. Elderly people often have to wait two or three years to get in. In the meantime private homes who currently have the capacity to take care of the older patients needing placement are filling the gap.

Talking about senior citizens one of the wealthiest men in Asia. He's ranked 104th in the world was pointed out to me in Hong Kong. He's Stanley Ho. 87 years young, and sometimes called "The King of Gambling" because he had a government granted monopoly for the Macau gambling industry for 35 years. Macau, by the way is just an hours ferry boat ride from Hong Kong. Now here's what fascinates me about Stanley Ho. He's infamous for being a technical polygamist He has four wives who gave birth to 17 children. I saw the house of wife no.4-not bad!!

There were three things that surprised me the most about Hong Kong. The first was that because of it's proximity to China the skies over the city were cloudy and very polluted. You almost never saw the sun.

The second was I had never learned about the extreme water shortage that hit Hong Kong in the 1960.s It was brought about a shortage of rain and a big increase in it's population's growth and water consumption. Could this be a harbinger of what could happen here?

The shortage got so bad that the government declared, it could only supply water to the public for four hours every four days. Public schools and businesses were closed so that every able bodied citizen could stand in line with buckets to collect water from street pipes that were turned on. The water shortage was eventually corrected by transporting and buying water from China. Hong Kong has also become a leader in the world in using sea water to flush waste from toilets.

The third surprising thing I learned from talking to people in all of the cities I visited in Asia is that all expressed deep concerns about our slowing economy, higher oil and rice prices, and are afraid that the end result, will be a slow down in their goods getting brought and tourists coming to visit.

Ho Chi Min City or Saigon (is a name still widely used by the Vietnamese)

Saigon has been under communist rule as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since July 2, 1976 With a population of 7 million it is the largest city in Vietnam, as well as well as one of the densest urban areas in the world.

1. When it comes to economic growth in Vietnam, it's uneven between the different regions. Since 1986 when the Communist party of Vietnam implemented free Market reforms, Ho Chi Min City has become one of the most successful business centers in Vietnam. However, the people are complaining bitterly because the inflation rate reached 16.4% in the first quarter of this year.

2. When it comes to how the economy is working for the people in Ho Chi Min City there does seem to be a rising disparity between the rich and the poor. Most people can not afford to live in the city where a furnished two bedroom apartment in a middle income neighborhood, can rent for \$475 American dollars. Many city workers, therefore, have to live miles away in the countryside. What really surprised me, though, was that a lot of the people I talked to complained that the people who were getting rich were corrupt government workers. They said, for example, its routine for a policeman to pull a car over and take \$20 dollars for not writing a ticket.

Two other important areas where, I heard complaints were education and health. Our guide who had been a former school teacher said that, despite the fact that Vietnam was a communist country, education was only free from 6 to 11 years and because of that, a great many children could not afford to attend school. He also said that in a country where the average salary is About \$100 dollars a month, the fee for going to the university is \$400 plus \$300 cost for, Spartan living conditions.

Now when it comes to health care, small public hospitals attempt to provide free care for those adults who have the least financial resources, and for children under 6. For too many families, however, the high cost of treatment puts many at risk for falling into a medical poverty trap.

The public hospitals now a days divide their patients into three categories: paying, non paying, and cadres-citizens who have leadership positions in the communist government. Needless to say, many people are incensed, that not only do the cadres not pay for their health care, but they receive the same level of services as paying patients.

The bottom line is, if people can afford it, they go to one of Ho Chi Min City's private, more expensive hospitals that offer better service and have more modern equipment.

4. One of the things I learned from my visit to Vietnam is also a lesson that we should apply to the aftermath of our war in Iraq. When we leave, and we will some day, the

Iraqis who helped us will suffer the same fate that those who helped us in Vietnam did, they will be left to deal with a conquering enemy. The aftermath wasn't pretty then and it won't be pretty in the future.

As an example, Our guide's father had been an interpreter for the Americans, he was sent off to a reeducation camp where he was tortured and was the only one of his friends to survive, most succumbing to malaria.

I also learned one of the reasons we had so much difficulty defeating the Vietcong in Vietnam. They lived in the homes of the villagers in the Mekong Delta and went to work along side the villagers in their rice paddies every day and helped them harvest their rice. The villagers in turn protected the Vietcong, and when the Americans came around didn't turn them in.

3. When it comes to the way Vietnamese treat the elderly, it is a totally different story from what I found in Hong Kong and later on in Singapore. There are no old age facilities. Children believe, it is their duty to take care of their parents. Our guide one of nine children, built a home for his parents in the countryside. All the relatives pitched into buy the materials and used their own labor to build the house.

Also since our guide was the oldest child, and the first one to go to the university, he helped pay for his next oldest sibling to get an education. That's how all his sisters and brothers got their higher education, by helping the next one down the line.

When it comes to how Ho Chi Min, or Saigon, is handling modern day problems such as traffic, simply put it isn't. Ho Chi Min City is rightly called the "Capitol of Motor Bikes" There over 4 million of them, constantly blasting their high pitched horns. To survive being a pedestrian, this is what you must do. Step into the street at a slow pace, don't speed up, above all don't stop or freak out or you'll totally mess up the system. You see those on the motor bikes have observed your motions and calculated the exact spot where your paths and theirs will cross. By the way, the first time you do this it feels like your are jumping off a bridge, without the bungee cord.

It's also fascinating to see that every thing in the city including furniture is delivered by bike.

Republic of Singapore

The last place I visited was the country of the Republic of Singapore and it's capital

Singapore. This country lies at southern tip of Malaysia and is only 272 sq miles long, making it the smallest country geographically in Southeast Asia.

Singapore's population is 4.68 million and is mostly Chinese. The government is what's called a parliamentary democracy It is however a one party parliament and the People's Action Party has held power since the 1950's.

1. When it comes to the economy Singapore is the 17th wealthiest country in terms of it's GDP. It's the busiest port in the world in terms of tonnage and can empty the cargo of a ship, and load it up again and get back on the sea in a day and a half.

Singapore has a result of it's manufacturing plants, petrochemicals, electronics industries, tourism industries an amazingly low 2% unemployment rate and has to import workers from Malaysia. It also has a low inflation rate 4.4%

One of the new economic developments in Singapore, that I found really interesting that it's working on becoming a medical tourism hub. It's private hospitals boast some of the finest doctors and medical equipment in the world. Each year 200,00 seek medical care in Singapore. By 2012, Singapore hopes to serve one million foreign patients.

2. When it came to overt criticism of Singapore, I didn't hear much of it because it has such a paternalistic form of government. I'm sure ,however, that there is plenty of criticism on the internet.

3. When it comes to the elderly in Singapore between 1980 and last year the number of people over 65 more than doubled to 300,000. By 2050 that number should be 9000,000.

Taking care of elderly parents by their family used to be a given in Singapore. Now more people are sending their parents to live in an what are called there old folks homes.

When it comes to paying for health care, Singapore has the three M's

They are:

Medisave Under medisave, individuals are required to put aside a fraction of their monthly income into their Medisave account. The money gains interest and individuals are allowed to use the reserves when paying for hospitalization, day surgery or on some outpatient expenses.

Now, about Singapore's campaign on being courteous. You can even find it in a daily column in the newspaper, where people write about courteous acts, they have witnessed. One man wrote about a bus No 57 that was already backing out of a bay when an elderly man started running after it. The bus driver noticed him and stopped to pick him up.

5. When it comes to handling a specific problem, such as traffic in a congested city, we should take a look at what Singapore has done. It's a tiny island, with a large population of over four and a half million people- many with high disposable incomes. Obviously that can result in too many cars and backed up traffic.

Well here is what Singapore did. First they said the population can not grow faster than the roads. Next, thru taxes, they made buying a car for the average citizen too expensive. Than, by pouring millions of dollars into an excellent public transportation system, they have been able to encourage people to use their cars only on the weekend and take the bus or train to work.

Finally, Singapore has put into place something New York has only just begun to talk about, which involves buying a ticket to enter certain parts of the city during peak business hours. Traffic jams are reduced and it certainly helps to reduce the problem of not having enough parking spaces.