

# The World is My Playground

by Brigitte Lakah

*My international trip was supposed to start on January 17 with deadheads to Anchorage, Alaska, and on to Seoul, South Korea. I opted to start my westward march from Louisville, Kentucky, a couple of days early to allow for a visit with my Alaska-based pilot friends. As a line-holder, I am allowed to deviate from the written schedule, as long as I show up for the first operating leg on time and well rested. Because I hadn't seen my pals in ages, I was looking forward to a reunion before starting work.*

Paul's pick-up truck was waiting patiently for me outside the Alaskan guard shack on this cold Sunday evening. When our other pilots found out I was in town, they called a 'staff meeting' at a nearby watering hole, where we had lots of 'pilot talk' and good laughs.

After a hearty breakfast at Gwennie's, one of the best diners in Anchorage, we set out to ride 'snow-machines'—Alaskan-ese for snowmobiles. The road trip to Big Lake, north of Anchorage, took 90 minutes in a diesel truck that refused to warm me up. But the cloudless view was especially breathtaking, and the dark-blue sky fought with the snow's blinding white for my attention. The endless mountain profiles along Cook Inlet's Turnagain Arm teased my eyes with unlimited detail. One thing to remember is how quickly the sun sets during Alaskan winters, so every second of daylight is enjoyed to the fullest.

We arrived at what is a boat launch pad in the summer, and Paul thought nothing of using it to drive his 7,000lb (3,200kg) of truck and loaded trailer atop the iced surface of the lake. He parked and offloaded the two machines. Wearing double pairs of gloves, balaclava hoodies, and helmets, off we went at 70mph (110kph) on the lake and tree-lined trails. I barely noticed where the lake ended and land started. Importantly, I was doing something exhilarating I had never done before, and immensely enjoying the moment despite the intense, frostbiting cold.

These ANC-based pilots and I work for the same company, but we seem to live in different worlds. They fly either the Boeing 747-400 or McDonnell Douglas MD-11. I fly the Boeing 757 and 767. Many pilots live in Anchorage while others commute





*Captain Lakah ready to take off on another global travel adventure.*



*Snowshoeing in Alaska.*

and use a crashpad. My friend, Captain Malcolm, owns a beautiful house in Girdwood on the ski resort of Alyeska. He hosts three reserve pilots—my friends Vince, Chuck, and Phil. They were also out riding their machines while waiting for crew scheduling to call, but they were on the mountain that borders Big Lake. With a two-hour call-out system, there is plenty of time to make it to the airport when required. Fortunately, nobody's phone rang, and in the evening we all congregated in Girdwood to cook porterhouse steaks. They weren't so lucky the next day, as new trips popped up in open time and they were all called out to fly. We may not see each other again for a month, or maybe a year, so we make every opportunity to get together count.

Back in Anchorage on January 19, an iMessage to PenAir's Captain Kirk led me to my next adventure: snowshoeing in Kinkaid Park. That's another first for me. What a fun workout! And such beautiful scenery. Who would have believed that, only three days earlier, I was jogging in Florida?

On Wednesday, First Officer Mike and I started duty—deadheading on a company 747 to Seoul-Incheon (IATA: ICN/ICAO: RKSS). We crossed the International Date Line and landed seven hours later, on Thursday; then on Friday we finally operated our first working

flight. Mike flew the first leg while I communicated with air traffic control. With a metric conversion chart in hand and headphones covering both ears, we managed to make our way to Qingdao Liuting International Airport (TAO/ZSQD) in China, without incident. Reading back metric altitudes when we are used to 'feet' can be very challenging, as can dealing with Asian accents. When they were still allowed to ride, pre-9/11, an Asian jump-seater, upon leaving my airplane, thanked me for a very nice 'fright' and mentioned that he had never 'frown' with a 'rady pirot' before.

All I did on Saturday was sleep, skipping the typical gym and dinner routines. Jetlag was starting to take its toll. We flew to Shenzhen Bao'an International (SZX/ZGSZ) on Sunday for the Chinese New Year of the Dragon. The festivities' preparations were abuzz all over Asia. People were shopping, lanterns were dancing in the windy streets and in the malls, and the continent's excitement was palpable. Pre-emptive fireworks ripped through the air, sounding eerily like snipers. I couldn't wait to join in the celebrations on Monday—but crew scheduling had other plans for us.

Instead of staying in the People's Republic of China, our three-day break was now moved to Clark (CRK/RPLC) on Luzon Island in the Philippines, located 3mi (5km) west of Angeles City, about 40mi (65km) northwest of Metro Manila. Clark was a US military base from 1903 to 1991, with an area of 14sq mi (37km<sup>2</sup>) with a military reservation that extended north for another 230sq mi (600km<sup>2</sup>). A stronghold of the combined Filipino and American forces at the end of World War II, the base was a backbone of logistical support during the Vietnam War. Following the departure of US forces, Clark Air Base eventually became the site of Diosdado Macapagal International Airport and the Clark Freeport Zone.

Even in the Philippines, the locals celebrated Chinese New Year with music, lanterns, and a ten-person dragon dance—much like a conga line, but more 'showy'—through the entire hotel (even passing through the gym to bless it). Throughout the day, everyone wished everyone else a happy year—very heartwarming.

I spent two lazy days by the hotel's pool while Mike visited friends and relatives; then it was time to move on. We returned to Shenzhen for a layover, and met up with other crews for the best breakfast buffet in the system—best because it's free; of course, as is widely known in this business, pilots love anything for free. As is customary in Shenzhen and Shanghai, a group of us went to the market—where haggling is a required sport that adds fun to the experience, even if we are arguing over pennies. Upon our return to the hotel, it was naptime. If we are going to be up all night, we have to sleep until we are hungry and eat until tired—there might not be time for either later.

Mike is a typically pleasant co-pilot who pays sharp attention to details and procedures. This helps me ensure

we don't make any costly mistakes. Like most FOs at his seniority level, he could hold a captain bid, but he prefers a superior schedule as a senior first officer instead.

The trip was finally winding down. We were eight days in with only two left to go. Flight 119 had taken us from Chinese into Japanese airspace in 3½ hours. I landed the 767 on Tokyo-Narita's Runway 34R like a butterfly with sore feet. The autobrake system brought the wheels to casual-stroll speed abeam Taxiway Delta. After a three-minute cool-down, we shut down the right General Electric CF6-80C2 turbofan and taxied using only the left one to save fuel. As we passed abeam the sole house that the prefecture couldn't buy, we chuckled at the large sign on the fence around this residential oasis: 'Down With Narita Airport'—as we always do. How anyone would want to live in the middle of an airport has always boggled my mind. Or did I secretly envy him? To make your home amid the magnificent sound of roaring engines, the smells of jet fuel and rubber on the runways, the aura of mysterious destinations...all magical things a pilot loves and longs for.

Mike started the auxiliary power unit while I kept the nose wheel tracking the taxiway centerline for spot 108. I stopped the jet when the marshaller crossed his wands, then set the parking brake and shut down the remaining engine. "Shut Down and Secure checklist, please."

I unclipped my airport plan and approach plate and put them back in the International 'P' (for Pacific) Jeppesen binder of the ship's library. Next, I unplugged my Sennheiser headset, put it in its case, then stowed it in my flight bag. I filled the garbage bag hanging on the center console with empty water bottles, leaving our work area clean for the next crew of this 767.

In Tokyo the time was 0700. I collected my carry-on bags and took them down the steep crew stairs—always a challenging task after sitting for hours. My airline's Flight Operations Manual recommends 'Three points of contact when on the stairs', which means 'grab the handrail and don't fall down'. Our cargo-stored suitcases were placed in the crew van for us by the time we arrived downstairs—one less thing to drag. A Japanese lady—whose English is better than my Japanese—handed me a clipboard in exchange for four copies of the general declaration that I remembered to sign twice. That clipboard also held two customs forms and two crew meal requests. I ordered the same as I always do: curried prawns, tuna sandwich, water, and milk. The last flight of this pairing, Narita (NRT/RJAA) to Anchorage (ANC/

PANC), would feel like the longest. In the meantime, an employee guided us through customs.

Out in front of the airport, our white-gloved driver was holding a 'CREW' sign, so we followed him to a fancy car that he seemed proud to drive. The ride to the Radisson was short. There would be other crews laying over at the hotel; we would eventually run into them and greet them like family members.

My room was very cold on this January day, and I looked for the way to warm it up. Who forgot to turn the heat on? Every hotel is different. Some systems use a friendly round dial, others have a digital selector with non-English choices that are impossible to decipher. Most have motion detectors inside the room for energy conservation. This hotel room had a set of switches next to the bed labeled 'LOW', 'MED', 'HIGH'. The first time I checked in, it took me forever to figure out. My fatigued state didn't help. Thankfully, the Toto toilet seat was pleasantly heated, as were the bathroom floor and mirror (to avoid shower steam). I brought my toiletries bag to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, splashed my face, and then tossed the five huge pillows on the floor. In total exhaustion, I collapsed into a near coma. I would unpack later, if at all.

The world is my playground and airports feel like home. As a child born in Egypt after the Nasser/Sadat-led revolution, I was raised in Belgium and then New York City. On the wall, next to my bed, was a Mercator map that I would study intently before going to sleep. When my family moved to the USA, I was only 15 years old and spoke little English. We would spend hours at the approach end of John F Kennedy Airport's runways and watch the airplanes land and take off. When we visited

my aunt in her Queens high-rise, we could count dozens of targets on final approach for LaGuardia on a clear night. Going to the airport was (and still is) a treat, whether it was to pick up or drop off a relative, or to simply hang out and stare at the ramp action. I have seen more of the world than most people, and I still have plenty to explore. Air travel allows me to shrink the planet and make any visit possible. If I were to lose my job as a pilot, I would be devastated. Where else can you feel this much freedom? Barring any medical problems, I don't plan on quitting anytime soon. ➔

