

Shanghai – Jen gets Prada

Many of you would have read the book or seen the comedy-drama, 'The Devil Wears Prada'. Well, our Jennifer Payne has her own Prada, thanks to President Obama's visit to Shanghai last week. We invite you to walk with us through a Chinese market where the lure of owning a designer handbag is too strong to ignore:

Packing my bags for a northern hemisphere winter while Hay's temperature hovered just below 40 was one of the most dysfunctional things I have ever done.

My hands went straight to the t-shirts and sandals, while my mind was telling me to go for the winter woollies.

Jen's weather map of Shanghai, thoughtfully downloaded on Thursday morning, prompted me to bypass the summer wardrobe.

But we were not fully prepared for our three days of winter when we arrived in Shanghai late on Friday evening for the Travelscene American Express conference.

By mid morning on Saturday we were turning blue and headed for the shops in our lunch break to commit the big no-no sin – shopping out of town.

As one does in China, we went straight to the multi-storey markets which are crammed with tiny little shops run by enthusiastic young entrepreneurs. This was Jen's first experience of shopping in Asia. We walked into the shopping complex while I explained the bargaining system to her, saying you could for instance pick up DVDs for a couple of dollars.

"You want DVD?" a voice piped up behind us.

"You come with me; cheap DVD.

"My brother has shop. Very cheap DVD."

We had no intention of buying pirated DVDs but I thought it would be a good introduction to bargaining for Jen. We followed our young man who was now treating us as his newest best friends – all the way from New Zealand! "I take you to my brother, he has cheap DVD," old mate assures us as he leads us deeper and deeper into the maze of shops.

He made sure we ignored invitations from other shop keepers to look at their 'genuine Pashmina' or 'good copy Prada'. We found old mate's brother who was not a happy little man. He had to shut his shop. "President Obama is in town and police are everywhere," he explained in a low apologetic voice.

Selling pirated goods or fake brand names (known here as 'good copies') is illegal and police raids are not uncommon.

Old mate is undeterred though. He has a cousin across the road who sells DVDs. So away we went; out the multi storey markets, down the road, across the highway weaving around buses, bicycles and the masses.

Jen was now becoming very uncomfortable.



"Do you really want DVDs?" she asked in a small voice.

"Not at all, I just want you to experience it all Jen – think of it as work. It's educational." We found cousin Ling's shop – four storeys high and packed to the rafters with videos, CDs and DVDs.

Each level is reached via a narrow dimly-lit staircase. Old mate returns to his own store and the front door is shut behind us. I suddenly felt like I have just lost my newest best friend. Jen has stopped talking to me by now but is sticking close to my side. We made our way to the top level, tripping over DVDs stacked on the dimly-lit narrow staircase. There was no one to hassle us, which I found unusual, but Jen was starting to relax and got into serious shopping.

I found an Andre Rieu DVD for just under \$3 and we made our way to the ground floor to pay Ling. We found the entire floor in darkness. No lights, no people, and no exit – the door was bolted down. Jen stopped talking to me again as we inched our way towards cousin Ling's silhouette. In a low voice he whispered, "President Obama is in town ... we like him, but he is bad for business. Too many Police around". We nodded in agreement, conclude our deal like criminals in the dark and hid our DVDs in our backpacks. Cousin Ling was anxiously staring at his mobile phone, waiting for the all-clear from a spy on the outside.

With a flood of apologies we were 'released', offered a free drink and assured that they really do like President Obama. They must have thought we were a couple of Yankees.

Jen's education continues when we re-entered the shopping maze. By now we had forgotten the reason for our visit. Buying winter woollies in an overheated shopping complex is not very appealing and Jen started looking at souvenirs to take home for her family. "Right, I'm done now," she declared as we walked out the first shop. "Good luck," I said. Jen didn't get it.

We still have to pass 239 shops to reach the exit. Many more stops were made and Jen became a pro at bargaining. Every time we left a shop her parting words were "I've got enough now, let's go". Jen was down to her last RMB215 (\$35) and was now "only looking, still need my beer money for tonight". And then we met the ultimate bag lady who was very keen to get one more quick sale and pack up before the police raid her store.

"Just come into my shop, no buying, just looking," Lillie pleaded. I was trying to prolong our stay, hoping for a police raid, so I encouraged Jen to check out the Pradas. The process is the same as in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The plastic bags hanging on the wall are just a façade. Lillie pushed the wall and it turned into a huge door through which we were quickly pushed. The wall/door shut behind us and Jen stopped talking to me again. Row upon row of 'good copy' bags, but out of reach of Jen's budget. She only had her beer money left. Lillie mistook her for a demanding customer and pushed on another wall. Another room the size of a toilet appeared – lined with more bags. Jen started to show interest in a Prada but still shook her head. She only has \$35 and told Lillie she didn't come to China to shop but had a conference to get back to. But Lillie was determined to see Jen off with Prada in hand. Today has been a bad one for business because President Obama is in town. We were now in the inner bowls of the shop, protected by handbag-lined fake walls. Jen was not talking; she felt trapped and she was quietly freaking out. Her beer money was only 10 per cent of the price Lillie had quoted her. Lillie removed one of the bags to find room to knock on the wall and like a scene from 'Open Sesame', the wall parted and we were urgently pushed into Prada heaven.

Jen made the mistake of picking up one of the bags. To cut a long, eventful story short, Jen was chased down the corridor by Lillie waving the Prada in her one hand while holding me hostage with her other hand, asking me what was wrong with my friend. "Just give me what money you have," Lillie pleaded. Jen decided to prove to Lillie that she barely had enough money to put a 10 per cent deposit on the bag. Lillie shoved the bag into

Jen's hands, grabbed the money and ran to her shop, calling out "luck for you lady, President Obama is in town today". I thought of the Gucci I saw in Lillie's shop.....

Cold air cut through us when we reached the street, dressed for summer on the Hay Plains - and with no money left to buy a sensible jacket.

And no, President Obama was not 'in town' on Saturday afternoon, he only arrived in Shanghai on Sunday night.