

Teaching overseas seemed like a great idea – until I got there. **BY THOMAS KLASSEN**

Lost in Translation

WHY? WHY? THE QUESTION POUNDED fiercely in my head as the airplane’s engines droned. Why was I on a 13-hour flight from Toronto to Seoul, South Korea, with my wife and two-month-old twins? And why would we not return home to Canada for 14 months?

A year earlier, studying Korean public policy and teaching in Korea had seemed like a wonderful way to learn, meet new people and return to Canada with a fresh perspective.

Touching down in Seoul, with a dozen pieces of luggage, two car seats and a double stroller, reality set in. Our new home was a

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city of 18 million people, who were all strangers and whose language I did not speak.

Still, making my first close friend was easy: the GPS navigation system in our car.

Unable to read street signs in Seoul, only this device allowed me to go shopping to buy the 20 diapers our twins needed per day. Without it I was lost in the city’s convoluted streets, expressways, many bridges, hills and tunnels. However, unable to program the Korean-language system, I could only drive to places which I – or more correctly the car – had previously visited.

Like many friendships, ours was tested early when one day, some distance from our home, the screen flashed a red message. Even without understanding the language, it was obvious that the machine was as lost as I. After prayers to the heavens, or at least the satellite in synchronous orbit 35,000 kilometres above, contact was finally re-established and I reached home. Never had I been so relieved to reach sanctuary. Suffering from shock, I refused to step outside our apartment for a week.

A few times, even the GPS, cell phone and maps failed to take me to my destination. For one lunch appointment, I never found the restaurant where I was to meet colleagues. I know I was close and had followed all the directions, asked (as best I could) for assistance from passers-by, but to this day, its location remains a mystery to me.

Other tasks became adventures as well. Taking our twins for a stroll always meant being stopped by folks on the street and,

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especially, in malls and stores. Nearly all twins in Asia are identical – for reasons that are not well understood – so Claire and Alexander were especially popular. Often we were swarmed by dozens of people, with cameras, eager to see non-Korean boy-girl twins.



Holidays became complicated. Christmas is a national holiday, as one-third of Koreans are Christians, and Buddha’s birthday in May is also a holiday, as another third of Koreans are Buddhist.

There are also two New Year celebrations: the solar on Jan. 1 and the lunar in mid-February. As a family, we became well versed in doing things twice.

At work at Yonsei University, two-thirds of students

dropped my course after the first class, once they realized that truly – as advertised – the course would be entirely in English. I tried not to take this (too) personally. I quickly grew used to not being able to read e-mails, memos, or just about anything that came my way and quickly deleted or trashed these. This is a transferrable skill that has served me well since.

In Korea, unlike York University, campus parking for students and staff is highly subsidized. As I learned, qualifying for this benefit is no simple matter. Obtaining my university parking permit involved producing, among other documents, my marriage certificate and my wife’s birth certificate. In prime parking areas on campus, students would double park, leaving their cars in neutral with the parking brake off, so they could be pushed around to allow other cars to come or leave.

One of the most common questions colleagues asked was my age. For years I have refused to answer this question, preferring uncertainty to “you don’t look it!” But in Korea, age determines speaking order, the form of address one might use and how deeply one bows. Age also decides who pays for lunch (the eldest). In my case, vanity proved more powerful than social grace – or even a free lunch – and my age remains a secret in Korea.

On the flight home, I reflected on the experience: Had it been worthwhile? Had I learned enough? However, over the drone of the engines, all I could hear was, “Let’s do it again, let’s do it again.” ■