

Around the World with a Printer

In a trip to far-flung ports of call, PAUL JAY discovers, among other items of interest, a working letterpress in Chiang Mai and Gutenberg Bibles in Mainz.

BACK IN 2008 my wife and I decided to step out of our easy suburban existence and do something crazy, so we took our two girls, Kelly and Jillian (then 12 and 8, respectively), out of school for six months and bought round-the-world air tickets. Starting from Canada, we travelled a rather complex route taking in Tunisia, the U.K., USA, Fiji, New Zealand, China, Thailand, Uganda, Germany and Norway, returning home via the U.K. again. There is a very modest blog website at www3.sympatico.ca/mayojay/ where you can get a flavour of our adventures, but here is a selection focusing on some of the printing-related moments within the odyssey.

SCREEN PRINTING IN FIJI

After the first few weeks of relatively civilized situations, we stepped back to basics by joining an eco-village project on a small island off the coast of Fiji. We discovered this through www.tribewanted.com. After some flights on increasingly small planes, we were ferried across from Vanua Levu (the northern large island of Fiji) to tiny Vorovoro (a couple of miles long!), where for three weeks we lived in a hut with grass roof, open windows, sand floor and no running water or electricity.

Our girls quickly adapted to this way of life and revelled in the warm Pacific Ocean lapping on the soft beach a few yards from our front door. Here we experienced encounters with falling coconuts, stranded starfish, beached whale skeletons, giant avocado trees, and big hairy spiders in the composting toilets.

The community is run by a combination of on-island staff from Tribewanted and a visiting “chief” elected by the online community. For our third week the chief was “Kaz,” a talented



Making screen-printed stools using traditional Fijian designs.

young woman from the California graphic arts business. She brought a project with her, to make screen-printed stools using traditional Fijian designs. Our daughter Kelly enjoyed helping with this project, even as ink consistency presented major challenges in this very humid atmosphere. The sale of the stools helped raise funds for the school on the nearby island of Mali (read more at <http://babasiga.blogspot.com/2009/01/tribewanted-and-artist.html>).

MUSEUM PRESSES IN NEW ZEALAND

We flew to Kiwi country from Fiji. Starting in Auckland, we spent three delightful weeks working our way around the North Island. In a museum at Whangarei (pronounced FAN-garay), I was impressed to see a Columbian press that was in very good condition. Until the 1960s it was used to print a local newspaper.

We made it all the way south to Wellington, and at a tourism centre I discovered that there is a printing museum at Lower Hutt. For an hour or so it was in our plans to visit this little mecca for printers. However, plans changed as we had



A Columbian press in New Zealand.

to do more driving than expected to nail down a campsite for our motorhome, so sadly Lower Hutt moved even lower on the list and I probably missed meeting some fellow members of the British Printing Society's Overseas Branch.

NO PRINTING MUSEUMS IN CHINA?

After New Zealand we spent four amazing weeks in China, where I kept searching for museum exhibits on the history of printing with movable type, by the country that did it first. No success! I did manage to get some old type at market stalls—both wood and metal. Here are some pictures of the characters and an attempt at printing with them (done for a compilation with my fellow members of the Ottawa Press Gang).

It was immediately obvious that the wood-carved pieces were not standard type height, in



Old wood and metal types of Chinese characters (above left and right), and an attempt at printing with the characters (right).

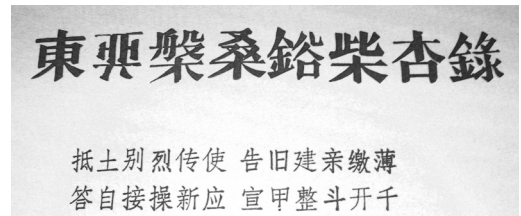
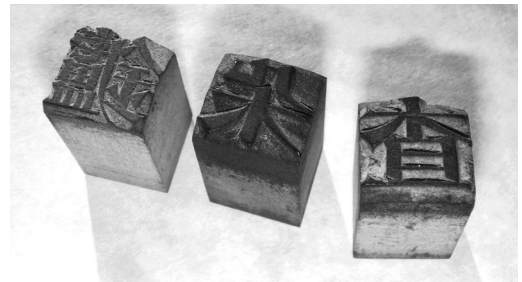
fact they may have been made as stamps rather than parts of a font. I did expect that the metal type would be more uniform, but it turned out to be quite variable also, and careful sorting (by looking at pin marks and style of the base casting) into similar sets resulted in me finding enough pieces of the same height to print a couple of lines. Of course, I have no idea what they mean, so they are of more artistic than practical interest.

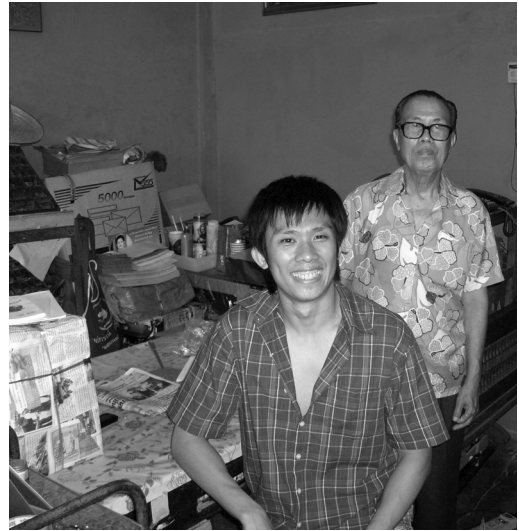
A WORKING LETTERPRESS

IN CHIANG MAI

Still flying west, we landed in Bangkok and spent a few days around there before heading north to Chiang Mai, where we enjoyed zip-lining through the jungle, riding elephants and taking a superb cooking course. I also got a haircut (using sign language), which was major entertainment for the rest of the family. Walking around the backstreets afterwards, we came across an open storefront that was obviously a working letterpress print shop.

Again, language was a challenge, but the older guy found his son, who explained that they still do a lot of business and proudly walked me round their shop, showing the large trays of Thai characters and some of the jobs they were running, which seemed to be mostly items for the tourist industry (bill forms and the like). What a treat to see letterpress still making a living for what looked like a family business—and not a computer in sight.





*A Heidelberg printing press—and not a computer in sight (left),
the letterpress print shop (upper right), and its proud owner and his son (lower right).*

UGANDA, AND THEN GERMANY

From Thailand (via Dubai and Addis Ababa) we made it to Uganda, where we spent four weeks helping in a community centre about 30 miles from Kampala. The only printing interest here was a) that the customs entry forms were very obviously done on letterpress, and b) trying to get donated laser and inkjet printers to work in the community centre. After a fascinating month, we headed north (again through Dubai) to stay a few nights with friends in Frankfurt.

The big treat in Frankfurt was a day spent at the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz. Actually being in the vault with the 42-line Bibles, both the early Gutenberg versions and the (much cleaner!) later versions by his investor/usurper Fust was quite inspiring. I had never understood from pictures in books how the type-casting mould worked, but looking at the real thing made this more evident. I thought the kids would be



*A printing press at the Gutenberg Museum
in Mainz.*



A 300-page hardcover keepsake of a fascinating adventure.

entertained by the “hands-on” workshop across the road next to the museum shop, but it only kept their attention for an hour or so, which was barely enough for me to absorb the several floors of the main exhibits. Still, the visit was a memorable opportunity to almost round off our big trip, and I came away with some facsimile pages of Genesis and St. John from the souvenir shop, which now grace our dining-room walls.

HOME TO CANADA

Leaving Germany, we went to visit more friends near Oslo and relaxed there for 10 days before passing briefly through the U.K. again on our way back to Canada. The following year I decided to create a permanent record of our trip for the benefit of our daughters as they get older. So I dug into my past issues of the

British Printing Society’s monthly magazine *Small Printer* and found several articles on bookbinding. I edited the blog of our trip into more continuous text and selected some of the 5,500 digital photos we had taken and laser-printed these into signatures, which I then stitched together into a 300-page hardcover book. I made six copies for our immediate family. Kelly and Jillian each have one, and in decades to come they may dip into it to recall some of the amazing adventures we had together and to roll their eyes at the many discoveries that fascinated their wacky printer father.

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 ~ Paul Jay is a member of the Ottawa Press Gang and the British Printing Society, in whose journal a previous version of this article appeared. He lives in Ottawa.