



Travails, Trips and Travels

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Volcanoes, Travel and a Conference

This is the second time I personally experienced and got affected by a major volcanic eruption on this Earth. The first one was in 1991 during the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines which cooled down the global temperature. The second one is that of the recent Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland which caused chaos in most parts of Europe.



Smoke shooting out of the volcano (Barcroft Media)

In 1991, my eldest brother got married in the central Philippine island of Cebu. The family took a plane from Manila to attend the wedding. While the festivities were going on, Pinatubo was erupting in Luzon. In the middle of all the chaos, we ended up taking a ship back to a dark and dusty Manila.

Nineteen years later, this volcano in Iceland erupted spewing ash clouds. As the winds blew volcanic ash were strewn all over Europe affecting most flights. Based on previous airline experience, these clouds cause engine failure. Not to take risks, authorities in these countries decided no-fly zones where these clouds are hovering.

It was so unfortunate that I had to present a paper in a global health conference in Geneva during this period. Since the organizing committee of the conference decided to push through, I also made a decision to go but not with the airline which I booked. Instead of flying Bristol-Geneva, I took a bus from Car-

diff to London (3 hours) and then transferred to another bus London-Paris (11 hours including Dover-Calais ferry ride and waiting time). I was thinking of taking a train from Paris to Geneva. When I arrived in Paris, I learned that the trains were on strike—too late to book a bus.

There were twists in the events that happened. In the London-Paris leg of the trip, I met Mathieu van Bellen, a young Dutch London-based violinist, who was on his way to Stuttgart for a string of concerts. He missed his connecting bus to Germany. Just like me, he had no way of taking the train. Luckily, his kind parents who live in the Netherlands offered to drive for him. I decided to join them.

While waiting for Mathieu's parents, my French bestfriend Alexandre Coret who came over to the bus station to see me accompanied us. We drove around Paris at midnight and saw its glory at this time. It was Mathieu's first experience of the capital. I even had a hand in the driving even if my license was not with me. We rendezvoused with the parents and left Paris at 2am. All I wanted was to get away from the train strike of France and go to another country and take a train from there to Geneva. I was dropped at the train station of Karlsruhe in Germany at 8am the following day. I got a train at 9am to Geneva via Basel. I arrived in my hotel at 2pm. I was exhausted of the whole trip which lasted 32 hours instead of the one-hour flight. Nevertheless I felt relieved since I reached my conference venue. I took time to enjoy the city.

Of the 1,000 delegates, only 500 were able to attend mostly from those in and nearby Geneva. To the horror of the organizing committee, the program had to be changed drastically. Many speakers were not able to come. They made use of videoconference facility to allow people to present their talks. Some sessions

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Alexandre and Mathieu



Low conference attendance

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were totally scrapped. Others were merged. It was a heroic and commendable effort of those in charge to be able to still come up with a very substantial programme.

I also had the opportunity of meeting different personalities like the Geneva Mayor Remy Pagani, Swiss Agency for Development



Conference speaker

and Cooperation Director-General Ambassador Martin Dahinden, and ICRC Director-General Angelo Gnaedinger.

The presence of other Filipino delegates who come from SSS and GSIS made my stay quite fun. When I attended the same conference in 2008, we were only two Filipinos. The other one came from the media.

On the last day of the conference, I thought everything was getting quiet and flights were resuming until I saw on CNN that the volcano had another major eruption. I scampered for ways of getting out of the city and going home. I monitored the airlines and checked buses and trains as alternative. I ended booking a train (Geneva-Paris) and a bus (Paris-London).

Unfortunately, I got a ticket which will make me wait for one night to catch the next bus. I took my chance of getting an earlier bus by waiting for hours at the station. When all the passengers were checked in, I



Geneva Mayor Remy Pagani



ICRC's Angelo Gnaedinger



Historic Geneva



Jet d' Eau



Filipino delegates

had the luck of getting a seat thus I left Paris at midnight. I arrived in London Victoria at 7am. I took the subway to Paddington Station and took a train to Cardiff. I arrived in Cardiff 20 hours later—exhausted and tired and lack of sleep.

As I look back at the events, I realize how uncertain life is. We just have to be ready of eventualities and learn how to deal with them. Despite the tense situation, I still kept my cool and made quick decisions. I do not wish similar events will happen again; but when they do, I hope everyone acts accordingly including those who decided to freeze the flights.



Ambassador Martin Dahinden