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Impressions of Burgeoning China By Whitney Skala

I've been on the ground in Shanghai for only 48 hours, and I've already had an exclusive audience with the US Consulate's Principal Commercial Officer, had another exclusive audience with the most senior officials of the Shanghai Foreign Investment Development Board, been briefed on the world's second-largest port (and the surrounding 116-square mile development), visited with Shanghai's leading architect, reviewed the intended layout of World Expo 2010 in Shanghai, and shopped-till-I-dropped.

All this was accomplished because I'm participating in the Asia Desk at San Diego World Trade Center's (SDWTC) trade mission to China. My ten-day trip is Phase I of Asia Desk's three-phase tour in Asia: after the Shanghai-Beijing-Chengdu leg, Asia Desk continues with a seven-day "Road Show," visiting outlying cities in China and exposing locals to participating San Diego businesses, and concluding with a seven-day trade mission to Vietnam.

Our group in Shanghai has been a tight-knit band of seven: a San Diego State business school professor; a SDSU staffer affiliate with CIBER—the international business center at State; an immigration attorney who is planning on using free time to visit clients in Asia; Bella Heule, the President of the WTC; Scott Wang, the WTC's head of its "Asia Desk" and the coordinator of the trade mission; Ron Roberts, elected official of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and an ardent proponent of San Diego business abroad; and, myself—a San Diego business and real estate transactional attorney who has been visiting Asia for the past five years but only as a tourist.

Committing ten days to abandoning my office in order to participate in a "trade mission" seemed like a questionable proposition: clients seem to keep their needs to themselves at the first whiff of my being out of the office, and after all, if I have any clients who need to know about "deep water ports," they usually give me enough time for a Google search before I need to respond.

But the realities of commerce, even commerce in San Diego County, are such that a familiarity with our trans-Pacific neighbors is no longer a luxury. And my commitment has been well-rewarded. Our first morning at breakfast, David Gossack of our Consulate emphasized that his office had expanded its staff and resources exponentially in the past several years, and stood ready to assist US corporations seeking to enter the China market or to join a Chinese firm in a joint venture. Mr. Liu Jin Ping of the Shanghai Foreign Investment Development Board indicated two new directions for the Chinese economy—an emphasis on expenditures on imports, and an expansion into investments abroad, including the US.

Being exposed to Shanghai's deep water port—construction just concluded on the third of five phases, and by the time of full expansion, the port will overtake

Singapore as the world's busiest port—included an excursion across an 18.6 mile bridge, to the off-shore port facilities. And then, this morning's private tour by Mr. He Xing, Shanghai's leading architect (Ron, an architect himself, owns a book of Mr. Xing's work), of the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Hall, provided insights into the future urban development of the city that few foreigners receive.

Incredibly, the trade mission's pace will be quickening. The next stop is Beijing, where the local American Chamber of Commerce President, Jim Zimmerman, hails from San Diego. His hour-long briefing to our group will be followed by a behind-the-scenes tour of the Olympic venues, and then the weekend will be filled with tours of the Imperial City and the Great Wall, alternating with attendance at the San Diego Padres exhibition games against the (dreaded) Los Angeles Dodgers. After three days, we will leave for the ancient city but modern tech Mecca, Chengdu, to witness first-hand one of the many "other" cities that attracts California businesses and produces products and research that compete globally.

Provided I'm able to find a cheeseburger once or twice along the way, I'll be keeping pace and collecting every piece of literature made available to me. And when we're done, my clients will hear about attitudes, trends, and resources that the papers won't pick up until the news is cold, if they pick it up at all. And if I let on how I came to all this wisdom, then you can bet that they'll be the ones elbowing me out on the reservation list for the SDWTC's next trade mission.

Mr. Skala is an attorney in San Diego; to learn more about him, please see his web page, at www.skala-apc.com. For more information regarding the San Diego World Trade Center and its Asia Desk, please see its web page, at www.SDWTC.org, or contact Mr. Scott Wang, at swang@sdwtc.org.