

**CALLOUT**

*Travelogue*

Volume 2, Issue 2  
March 2019





Callout joined our consulting team on an exhilarating trip around the globe. From eight diverse countries we bring you stories of near-death experiences, drinking matches, spooky encounters, celebrity sightings and a host of other adventures. Sit tight and enjoy!





Our first stop was a small yet thriving town in Vietnam, **Thai Nguyen**. After sampling quite a bit of the local fare, we craved for a little familiarity in our meals and went looking for some good ol' fried chicken at a local joint. After almost an hour of waiting, someone placed a salver on our table covered with a large cloche. What lay underneath it was a **whole chicken simply dunked in boiling hot oil**. Not exactly the finger lickin' good treat we'd hoped for, we turned to the hotel mini bar for some midnight munching. We soon realised the full magnitude of the Vietnamese fondness for frying things whole when we spotted this **entire fried pig** at a road side stall. Well, we should've known better than to order something deep fried in a country whose cuisine is considered to be among the healthiest in the world.



Travelling to the capital city of Hanoi, we set out to explore the bustling streets of **The Old Quarter**. As we ambled along the French-colonial city, we loved the cultural mix of Eastern and Western influences which are mirrored in the style of many architectural gems. This was when we stumbled upon **Hanoi's own Avalon** which was a modern restaurant overlooking the Hoan Kiem lake. Such a cosmic coincidence that the font of the restaurant name looked so much like our own Avalon logo!



On our last night in Vietnam, Callout accompanied Vivek, Jaldeep and two other Avalonites to a dinner with the client team at a local restaurant. Great food and drinks kept the conversations flowing and the fun going. To top it up, we were treated to some **traditional homemade rice wine**, a sweet spiced drink served in shot glasses. Now, where there's wine there's a toast and in Vietnamese culture they raise a toast to good health (chúc sức khỏe). Each toast is followed by a swig and it is also customary to reciprocate every such toast with a counter-swig. What made the evening more interesting was our blissful ignorance of the high level of alcohol content in the wine.

Although outnumbered by the 12- member strong client team, Vivek and Jaldeep persisted in their efforts to match toast for toast. What followed the touchdown of a double-digit score on drinks was a milder version of the movie Hangover sans the missing friend. Like in the movie, the next morning the team found itself in their respective hotel rooms with no recollection of the previous night's events.

Let the record show that Callout remained stone cold sober through the night and has a vivid recollection of the rest of the evening. It would be fun to recount those wild stories, but maybe some things are better left unsaid. What we can tell you however is that the famous Vietnamese coffee truly works wonders for hangovers. That's what kept the team going through their presentations the next morning.



Needless to say, we ended our trip on a great high.



# JAPAN

Japan, of the famous **5S – Sushi, Sumo, Sensei, Suzuki and Sake** (don't pay heed to some other management consulting jargon versions) – is known to have many facets, and we (Nikhil, Prem and Callout) were thrilled at the chance to experience some of them.

**Konnichiwa!** The first thing we noticed on arrival in Tokyo was the endearing warmth and politeness all around. The sense of discipline and punctuality took some getting used to—we barely caught the sharp 8:05 am bus to **Yokohama**, a port town steeped in intrigue. In between presentations, meetings and plant visits, we bonded with a warm client team over thrilling encounters with a **North Korean spy-ship** at the Coast Guard museum and a multi-gated shrine whose history parallels the many battles of Japan's famous warrior clans.

Everyone we met was unequivocal in their insistence that we pay a visit to Mt. Fuji, the unique snow-capped volcano and Japan's biggest celebrity. Given that it disappears in the clouds by afternoon, we set out early morning on the Shinkansen (bullet train), half asleep but majorly excited. We rode through a picturesque landscape enhanced by the autumn season of red, pink and orange leaves. **Fuji-san (venerable Mr. Fuji as he is known locally)** didn't disappoint, and seemed to smile in approval when we picked up a souvenir glass bottle shaped like him.

Next we set out to explore Japan's strong affinity for green-coloured food. Imagine an island full of **olives, wasabi, and matcha-flavoured everything!** Sitting at a café experiencing the raw and sweet-savoury acquired taste of a matcha-flavoured latte, we spotted a cat that

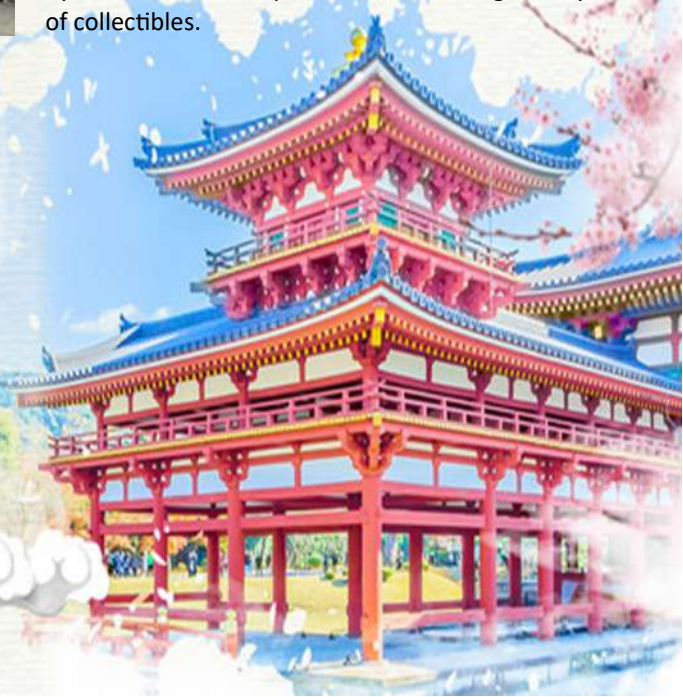
seemed to be beckoning us by waving its paws. Feeling the Asian mysticism all around us and dearly missing his pet cat, Nikhil decided to visit Gotokuji, a unique shrine dedicated to a beckoning, luck-inviting cat.



We found the perfect Samurai inspired Batman figurine just in time for the bus. Much like tetris, our Japan trip fell neatly into place and we headed back with the memories of a lifetime.

To the many Japans we experienced, we said Sayonara and to the ones remaining, **Atode mata kimasu...**we will be back!

Back at the hotel, we experienced a contrast that is so typical of Japan—we went from the tranquil to hi-tech in a matter of minutes. Between some helpful tips from the hotel's in-house robot, our misinformed Japanese and the complex Tokyo subway map, we landed up in **Akihabara, the world's mecca of Gaming and Manga**. The sight of neon-lighted video game parlours rekindled childhood memories, and we were overwhelmed by the countless shops and their amazing variety of collectibles.





# CHINA

Callout accompanied Subho and team to **Xiamen, a beautiful port city** situated along the South-eastern coast of China. Our adventure began right from the airport when we met with our designated driver- a very young chap who didn't appear old enough to drive. We let this observation slide and attributed it to the enviable age-resistance of oriental skin.

Our child prodigy navigated his way around town, preening a little too often at his GPS. All of a sudden, he realised he was about to miss a right exit, so he swerved sharply to the right (without checking the lanes of course) straight into the path of a **speeding 18-wheeler heavy duty vehicle**. The driver of the mammoth vehicle had better reflexes than our man and we pulled to safety just a few meters shy of it. As we checked our vital signs, we found that our young friend had just received his licence and this was probably his maiden voyage. Callout had dreamt of throwing in a few kicks and punches like Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee while in China, but definitely hadn't expected to be in a scene out of Fast & Furious.

With all our vital organs and limbs still intact, like every self-proclaimed travel junkie, we set out on a culinary adventure across China. Subho and Callout fell in love with Hunan cuisine and can't recommend the Hunan-style veal enough. We then joined Vivek and our Chinese hosts for dinner at a local restaurant in the Sichuan province. This turned out to be rather interesting. Instead of the usual cutlery, in true Chinese style, **boiling red fish sauce was set atop a hot plate** and set out in front of each us. Served alongside it were all kinds of exotic meat and vegetables. The real way to eat these was to cook them on the hot plate and dunk them in the red broth in front of us. We discovered that picking food from another person's plate is not unusual for the Chinese and in keeping with this communal spirit, one of our Chinese hosts took a piece of meat off Vivek's plate



(which he was particularly trying to avoid), dunked it in Vivek's bowl of sauce and proceeded to feed it to him. Maintaining utmost civility while holding back a gag reflex isn't easy, but Vivek pulled it off admirably.

To burn some calories and to explore our surroundings we strolled through a local park where we saw a rather interesting sport being played. **Shuttle Kick or Jianzi** as they call it in Chinese, is a traditional Chinese sport where a heavy shuttlecock is tossed around the circle of players much like a football.

The aim of the game is to try to keep the shuttlecock in the air using only the feet. Vivek came back with a few of these traditional shuttlecocks and Callout came back with a



pulled hamstring (darn they made it look so easy)





From the Orient to the Occident, our next stop was the beautiful town of Oxford. The town not only boasts of the oldest university in the English speaking world, but also of 12<sup>th</sup> century churches, Victorian buildings, museums, the Balliol and Trinity colleges, the iconic Blackwells book store, the incredible Bodleian library and a vast number of cozy cafes and pubs.



Callout accepted Santosh's gracious lunch invitation and were amazed to see how far one gravy recipe can take a budding chef.

Then we went driving around town and found this house with a **really quirky rooftop sculpture**. We also went shopping at the many thrift stores and that's where Santosh met his inseparable companion of the cold Oxford winter – **his beloved muffler**.

We crammed in a **side-trip to Barcelona**.

Among our many amazing experiences, we particularly remember a visit to the popular tiny restaurant El Rincón del Cava. Not only were the tapas and cava to die for (Cava is the Catalan version of champagne, if you didn't know), but the walls are covered in photographs of patrons and the folks at the restaurant treat you like kings. Other must-try items in Barcelona are **Batata Bombas** (potatoes filled with meat) and **Pimientos de Padron** (fried baby green peppers.)



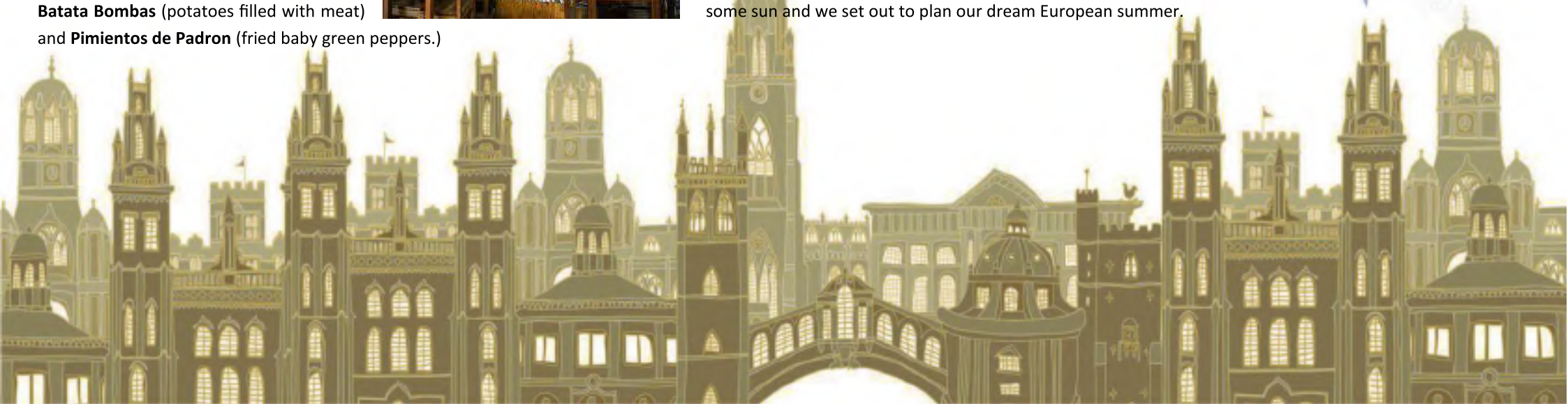
By the way, Santosh has the **best flight karma** ever. He forgot to check-in on a Ryan Air flight, had to pay a late check-in penalty; but the very next flight with the airline got delayed, so he was compensated by them. **Net gain: A cool 30 grand.**



Next we went **hobnobbing with some famous British folks**. This included some time with Lord Karan Billimoria, British MP of Indian origin, and founder CEO of Cobra Beer. He took the group for a personal tour of both Houses of British Parliament and had a tête-à-tête on Brexit where Callout made some great points. This was the day when the Government's Brexit proposal was realised, and Lord Billimoria was carrying a hard copy of the 600+ page document. Talk about being in the thick of diplomatic action.

On a walking tour of Oxford, we were joined by Sylvia Vetta, a writer of cross-cultural fiction and married to an Indian. She hadn't heard of Callout. To be fair, Callout hadn't heard of her either.

By the end of a cold British winter at Oxford, our tropical bones longed for some sun and we set out to plan our dream European summer.





The Mediterranean island of Malta is essentially a large limestone rock that about 400,000 people call their home. This **halfway point between Europe and Africa**, south of Sicily, is supposedly a great place for sun, sea and serious culture-soaking. Callout joined Niyati to see what the fuss was all about.

**Valetta** the capital city is only 1 km by 600 mtrs in area and is almost entirely pedestrian since cars are quite impractical for the narrow streets. It retains its 16th century elegance with dense clusters of yellow limestone buildings, timber balconies and majestic churches. Its narrow streets almost invariably end in the ocean, no matter which one you take.

Among its many iconic buildings, a visit to an old 16<sup>th</sup> century hospital—**La Sacra Infermeria**—stayed with us in a way. The most revolutionary hospital of its time, it is now a thriving convention centre and among Europe's finest. We listened in rapt attention as our tour guide described in chilling detail, accounts of medieval surgical procedures, dissections, amputations and Extreme Unctions (anointing of the dying). We tried not to imagine what the surgical knives and other medieval paraphernalia were used for. Just as our nerves were recovering, she casually mentioned she had recently led a group of spirit mediums who felt a **distinctive presence of pained souls** in a section of the hospital. They believed these to be women. Our guide later recollected that this particular section of the infirmary used to serve as a maternity ward over four centuries ago. Callout doesn't spook easy, but we bounded out of there a little quickly after that.

The Maltese language resembles Arabic, but is laced with Latin, Italian, French, select traces of its many foreign rulers and some exciting curse words that Callout was quick to pick up. The locals are remarkably helpful, speak English and are completely unassuming. We learnt that the Prime Minister drives himself to work and **we spotted the Finance Minister coolly waiting his turn at a convenience store!**

We met a host of interesting people – **Nikolai, our Bulgarian cab driver who was the spitting image of Raj Kapoor** and who surprisingly was well-aware of the fact. Our chatty **Romanian housekeeping lady** who astonished us one day in the middle of her cleaning drill to ask us if we loved Hrithik Roshan as much as she did. She went on to describe in detail, Romania's collective addiction for the Indian soap Balika Vadhu (fondness for domestic drama is universal looks like). Special shout out also to our hotel owner's teenage son who helped us create daily customized itineraries depending on where our meetings were and how much time we had to spare.

Among our most memorable experiences were the **prehistoric Haagar Qim megalithic temples** that are over 7000 years old, watching the sunset at **the Dingli cliffs** at the highest point in all of Malta with the most spectacular views and a **weekend cruise to the tiny but gorgeous island of Gozo**. We were fortunate to visit the **Azure window an iconic Maltese natural rock arch formation** that collapsed a while ago in a storm.

With our joy and sun tans running deep, we packed our stuff in preparation for our voyage across the ocean, to Africa.







# KENYA

Two thousand miles away, in east Africa, Kenya feels like home. The streets of Nairobi are dotted with Indian shops and you will bump into plenty of Kenyans of Indian ancestry (locally known as **Wahindi**). Here's a list of other random things we learnt about Kenya.

- **Delicious food** is bountiful
- The people are devout and prayers are taken seriously (one time the client team graciously included the Avalon team in their prayers and thanked us for our services, hoping for more presentations from us)
- When haggling, be sure to mention you are **Indian-Indian and not Kenyan-Indian**. This bizarre practice ensures we get better deals. Don't ask why or how, just do it.
- Take a token ride in a **local share auto or matatu**. It is cost-effective and fun to say
- For the time-pressed business traveler, a visit to Nairobi national park is a must for a little slice of safari. This is probably the only place in the world where a real safari is possible

against the backdrop of skyscrapers. The whole **concrete-jungle-meets-actual-jungle feeling** is weirdly wonderful

- Bringing a little Africa back home is easy – the choices for souvenirs are mind boggling. In a superbly quirky choice,

Karthik brought back a handpicked collection of **Masai dolls** to which he fondly devotes a floor in the festive formation of golu during Navratri. So deep was his golu-love and so excessive the golu-indulgence, that we discovered there were more dolls than luggage space, so some were graciously carried back by Naimish.

We could go on for hours about **spectacular sunsets** and sightings of **sleeping lions** at the Masai Mara reserve, but that will have to wait for another Callout issue. Because we have a word limit here and because we didn't actually go.





The North African country of Morocco is a land of varied landscape – ancient cities, sweeping deserts and not one but two coastlines - one Atlantic and the other Mediterranean.

Our travels took us to the commercial town of **Casablanca** and to the political capital **Rabat**. The Consulting team geared up for some client meetings and presentations (yawn). Callout, the old romantic fool set out in search of Rick's Café, the setting for the World War II Humphrey Bogart classic *Casablanca*. Pity we found that the café did exist, but the actual movie was shot in Hollywood. Darn.

With some major prodding from Callout and from the gregarious client team, the Consulting team was persuaded to loosen up after a hard day's work and soak in the place.

As the sun was setting upon Rabat's dreamy landscape we absorbed the **city's French colonial legacy, entwined with the traditional Arab culture**. Out of nowhere, we found ourselves borderline manhandled by a rather persistent tour guide who kept pointing to rather dilapidated fortress offering to walk us through. The Consulting guys were beat and wanted to go back to the hotel, but far be it from Callout to give up the chance of an adventure. Our collective curiosity finally got the better of us and we allowed him to lead us through.

In a Narnia-esque turn of events, we entered another dimension— smack into a sensory overload of sights, sounds and smells. **Rabat's medieval walled-in city or medina** had found us.



The smells of fragrant cumin, paprika, coriander, cilantro, lemon, garlic, onions, saffron, and olives wafted around us and busy shoppers scuttled past us looking for a bargain. Someone somewhere in this maze was making a chicken and olive *tajine*, that complex, rich, fresh and spicy **terracotta vessel-baked stew** for which Morocco is famous. Vivine marveled at the resemblance with the earthen pots back in Kerala. We walked around buying knick-knacks and Vivine gleefully stocked up on magnets to add to his collection.

**From Morocco to South Africa**, in a fitting farewell to our African adventure, the generous client team drove us to the **Cape of Good Hope** where we learnt that it was named for the optimism resulting from a sea route from Europe to India and destinations further east.

With similar hopes for Avalon to continue on its own global journey, we wrap up our travels and this Callout issue. Comments and compliments awaited.



**BIG thanks to Vivek, Jaldeep, Subho, Nikhil, Santosh, Niyati, Karthik, Naimish, and Vivine for sharing your memories, stories, and pictures.**