



You Paid for Lunch ...

Do you know that old chestnut about the two Texas oilmen out together? They are walking down the street after having lunch together and stop in at a Cadillac dealership. "I'll take that one," said the first oilman, pointing at a car and reaching for his wallet. "No," said his friend, reaching for his own wallet. "Let me pay for it. You picked up lunch."

Let me tell you today about my own experience in exactly that kind of situation (although the 'Cadillac' in question wasn't a car, but the famous Japanese Shinkansen train)!

It happened back in the early 1980s when I was working at the music company. Three of us - the owner, his wife, and I - were on a buying trip to Asia, spending a few days in Tokyo to purchase some flutes, then moving on to Taiwan to meet with a company supplying saxophones. When we were planning the trip, the owner mentioned that he would like to get a chance to 'see some of those famous Kyoto temples', so I arranged that we should arrive in Japan at Narita, do our business in Tokyo, travel by train down to Kyoto, do our sightseeing, then leave from the Kansai directly to Taiwan. Our Canadian travel agent set up the flights and hotels for us, but left all the domestic travel arrangements to be handled by us on a day to day basis.

The first part of the trip went exactly as planned, and we had a productive meeting with the flute makers. Once that business was out of the way, we moved on to the sightseeing part of our itinerary - covering our casual expenses personally.

Because we hadn't known in advance just when we would be making the trip, I hadn't made any reservations for the Shinkansen journey from Tokyo to Kyoto, but we weren't travelling in high season, so I knew that we would have no problem getting seats. And we didn't. But I did make a mistake with the tickets ... a *big* mistake.

I had been to Japan on two occasions before this journey, and was proud of the wonderful Japanese train system, and of my knowledge of how to use it. As we arrived at Tokyo Station, I didn't take the three of us to a ticket window to make the arrangements, but did it through a ticket vending machine. I was trying to 'show off' - to show my boss how the Japanese system was so advanced, that you could make reservations for this futuristic train - and even pay for the tickets - in just a few seconds, all through a little vending machine.

So I did. I began to punch the appropriate buttons to select the particular trip and seating that we required, but the boss - not understanding any of the Japanese characters on the screen, stepped back out of the way to wait with his wife while I completed the transaction. Once the tickets were selected on the screen, I then had to pay for them. If you have ever travelled on the Shinkansen, you know how expensive it is. A trip of this length for three people was about 40,000 yen, equivalent to about a week's pay for me back then.

Japanese vending machines of this type are ready for large amounts, and of course accept 10,000 yen notes. I shovelled four of them into the machine - this was my own money I was using - scooped the little bit of change into my pocket, got our tickets, and then went to the boss and his wife to give them theirs. He took his, saying simply, "Thanks!" and we walked towards the ticket barrier, made our way inside, and ... zoomed off to Kyoto.

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He had no idea at all how expensive the tickets had been. After all, he had just watched me purchase them in exactly the same way that I had been buying subway tickets over the past couple of days, and with the same casualness. Just stick a couple of notes into a vending machine. Easy!

And rather than seem 'cheap' and say something like, "By the way Bill, perhaps you would like to pay me for the tickets," I bit the bullet, and kept quiet.

But that evening, when we were at a bar in Kyoto having dinner, I let *him* reach for the check, you can be sure!

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