



On the ARN from Hanoi to Shenzhen

“Asian Trucker is sending Devindran Ramanathan on a trip to continue the journey on TNT’s ARN. He comes back with lots of insights into regional trucking and here is what he has to report.

“I grew up in Ipoh (the mining town that tin helped build in Malaysia) in the 70’s. My home is just off the busy Tiger Lane (now Sultan Azlan Shah Road), then a main trunk road linking cities and towns like Kuala Lumpur, 200km in the south to Penang in the north” tells us Devindran just before he heads to Hanoi for the continuation of the trip on the Asian Road Network, ARN.

“I’ve been passing time watching trucks go by”

Many may remember Stephen Bishop’s popular song “It might be you” in the 1982 film Tootsie, with the lyrics of “I’ve been passing time watching trains go by”. Now substitute “trains” for “trucks” and you may just conjure an image of me as a little boy watching trucks going by.

Those were the days before the North South Expressway was built and the road fronting my house was the main Federal Route for all traffic and commerce plying their trade from the Malaysian-Singapore border in the south to the Malaysian-Thai border in the north.

Often light and heavy trucks would choose to park overnight for light repairs and rest across our home. The shade and safe distance away from the busy junction was perhaps the contributing reason. Timing wise, I guess most drivers if they were driving solo, would have required a break, considering a trip from KL to Ipoh or Ipoh to Penang would have taken at least 5 hours for these heavy commercial vehicles.

Back at home, my mum would often take pity on the drivers and would send me to offer them a hot drink and biscuits. Thinking back, perhaps that’s why many familiar faces must have chosen the front of our home for their ideal truck stop. When the drivers were free to talk, my conversations with them mainly centred on where they were coming from or travelling to and what cargo they were carrying?

Later at night when I lay in bed troubled by the noise they made repairing their truck, I use to wonder what their daily life pattern was like; what they ate, if their seats was comfortable for the long haul or how long were they going to be away from their families.



Hanoi to Shenzhen – 1250 km road trip

Fast forward 35 years on, so when Asian Trucker asked if I would be interested to participate in a road trip on a truck, I immediately jumped at the opportunity.

I was even more thrilled when told that I would be completing the Hanoi to Shenzhen leg of the Asian Road Network (ARN) hosted by TNT. Asian Trucker earlier completed the Kuala Lumpur to Laos journey (Issue 13).

ARN is an integrated road delivery service which is available in Asia. With their tagline “Cheaper than air freight and faster than sea”, ARN trucks operate successfully in routes connecting Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and China with cost efficient offerings.

I boasted to Stefan that I used to service Volvo prime movers during my college holidays in the UK and was impressed by the level of driver comfort and technology in these vehicles. Mind you, those were the days when tachographs were state of art tools. Stefan cautioned me instead about getting my hopes too high on the comfort part as a passenger.

Dinesh Kanapathy, the Regional Operations Manager of ARN had been in constant communication with me prior to the trip and provided me with all the necessary names and travel details to ensure my journey was clear of any obstacles.

Hanoi to border trip delayed by a day

I arrived at Nai Bai International Airport on August 1st afternoon for my scheduled journey the following morning at 4am, from the TNT My Dinh depot just on the outskirts of Hanoi.

The TNT team recommended staying closer to the depot, at the Grand Plaza hotel located 40 km from the city and approximately 7 km away from the My Dinh depot. I contacted Mr Nguyen, TNT My Dinh Freight Manager to inform him that I wished to recce the route to the depot as I wasn't going to be taking a chance on the taxi driver losing his way at 4am the next morning.

I grabbed a cab to TNT Hanoi's office, just 15 minutes away to meet with Mr Nguyen. With a big welcoming smile he informed immediately that my departure, scheduled the following morning was postponed a day due to some custom difficulties experienced by the truck from China. The truck from China was scheduled to swap the complete trailer with our Vietnam truck at the border the following day.

I was told to expect an email to this effect from their county manager later in the evening. While at the depot, the Freight Manager gave me a quick tour of the facilities to witness activities of warehousing to distribution being performed. In total, TNT has 12 trucks which are sub-contracted but totally managed in-house.

There is a buzz of activities at this depot with pickers and packers processing consignments and paperwork to match the smooth physical flow of the goods throughout the country both inbound and outbound.

“When you consider that the objective is to provide high quality freighting service at attractive prices, the total distribution concept needs to be understood by all the employees in the organization” advised Mr Nguyen.

I returned to the hotel before dark and walked around to the nearby shops to locate my first local treat. Slowly savouring the steaming hot bowl of Beef Pho noodles for dinner allowed me time to mull over the fact that I had the entire following day to roam Hanoi and the delay to my plans once I arrive in Shenzhen.





Good Morning Hanoi - The much awaited journey begins @ 4 am

It's been raining the entire night as I arrive at the TNT My Dinh depot at 4am; the security dogs are first to be alerted of my arrival. I am showed to my truck and the staff on duty beats the doors of the somewhat post war looking American Freightliner with 6X4 tractor unit capable of hauling up to 40 tonnes. The drivers were sleeping in the sleeper cab the entire night after loading their consignment the night before to ensure we were quick to move out of the city before morning traffic set in.

I immediately choose to "ride shotgun" position (an early American term to claim front passenger seat beside the driver) while the other driver sat in the sleeper compartment as we depart the depot. We clear through the security checkpoint upon showing proof of our consignment documents of our haulage. 3 hours cruising out of Hanoi, morning dawns amidst the purring of the Detroit & Cummins engine, trucking an 18 tonne pay load to the Vietnam-Chinese border.

The interior of the cab has seen better days, but what seemed most important was the driver's ease of handling the truck with all the necessary comfort features laid out around him. To our driver, having to reach his can of Red Bull and closeness to the air horn lever seemed the most important accessory to keep him alert. At the end of the day, a safe and comfortable driver is a productive driver, I guess.

The rain and winds intensify throughout the journey and this is confirmed in the local Vietnam English newspaper which I brought along from the Hotel. The paper warned residents of the North to prepare for floods as Tropical Storm Jebi was continuing to gather strength and due to hit East Sea in the very same day.

I couldn't believe my luck as I was going right smack into the eye of the storm as portrayed in the newspaper diagram of the storm predicted path.

As we ascend the final part of the Vietnam leg, you get to see the richness of the soil, rice fields and the many river tributaries

crossings as we approach Lan Son town, less than 40km from the border.



Due to its ideal location, it served for centuries as a gate-way to China as well as the path of several invasions including the site of 3 French defeats during the colonial war late 19th century.

Rain begins to beat heavier as our driver decides to retire for breakfast into a local town Dong Dang, on the Sino-Vietnamese border, which is 14km after Lang Son town (the last major city before China). Just three kilometres to the east of Dong Dang is the Huu Nghi (Friendship) border gate where we seem to be heading for the container exchange. As long as living memory can testify, the border gate has been a major point for the exchange of goods between Vietnamese and Chinese living on either side of the border areas.

It was a bowl of hot local noodles for me with a cup of hot local tea with our drivers and other local truckers at this road side eatery. As the rain got heavier, local drivers exchanged advice, amidst deafening thunder and lightning to move on to our destination before some of the roads become impassable due to anticipated landslides and floods.



At the “Friendship border”

Our truck quickly moves on under heavy downpour to the TNT border office where I alight, bid farewell to my Vietnamese truckers and am welcomed by lovely Ms Ngoc from the TNT border office holding an umbrella. Much of my time (6 hours wait) here was spent chatting with Ms Ngoc who spoke good English while waiting for the China Truck to cross over to the Vietnam side of the border for the trailer exchange at approximately 3 pm.

Ms Ngoc explained how TNT operates in this region through the 3 road hubs in the country; one each in Hanoi, Danang and Ho Chin Minh and the number of fleet size in operation.

She also explained in greater detail about the truck departing from China which had an issue with the customs system and had caused the one day delay I experienced. The system was only backed up and running the next day.

What added to the delay further was that since it there was going to be an exchange of container and it now being a Saturday, the Chinese customs only allowed exports of general cargo for a limited time only between 3pm to 5 pm. The mornings are limited to import of perishable cargo only, hence our delay!

It was apparent that country specific rules and regulations, custom documentations, clearance, swapping of containers are rife with challenges despite the best efforts by companies like TNT is used to handling.

Delays beyond their control cost money and at times like these, customer service levels must prevail besides the incurred additional cost.

Managing International Road Freight

Witnessing how TNT manages their international movement of goods by road earned my total admiration. It requires a thorough knowledge of documents as well as know-how about country specific laws and practices, policies and procedures on the physical distribution of goods being transported.

Keeping up-to-date with changes is no easy management task, dates can change as I experienced, and staffs at various border offices have to work towards a common goal.

Ms Ngoc hands me the cargo manifest which seems complicated paperwork to an ordinary person, but herein contains the critical information on road freighting to the consignor and consignee and the listing of various products due to many Chinese destinations.

Some goods are semi-finished electrical items carefully transported by road for the cost effective frontier crossing and door to door delivery choice. It's all about the right load, to the right international destination, on the right time, at the right price. The importance of road transport can hardly be over-estimated.

Ms Ngoc explained that as the storm was rather unusual, that I will not be in position to go to the yard to witness the container swap. Instead she suggested we have lunch at a nearby town and best make my way across the passenger immigration as the Chinese TNT staffs was awaiting my arrival on the other side.



Ni Hao! Friendship Border Crossing at 4pm - 3rd August

I intercept the Chinese truck as it comes off the Ping Xiang integrated free trade control. The Chinese truck clearance was non-bureaucratic and fast from both border check point to immigration control.

As it was still raining, I am quickly whisked into a Sinotruk Howo 4X2 tractor for our overnight journey across two provinces along with our container from Hanoi. Neither the driver nor his assistant both spoke English so it was going to be a challenge again.

Just after a 30 minutes' drive, the driver signals in international sign language that we will be stopping for dinner. Everyone seemed to know everyone here as it is a frequent stop for local truckers before getting on the inter-province highway. I realized we spent longer than usual as the drivers were determined to ensure I was entertained to some of the best cooked local Chinese cuisine.

"On a normal journey, the drivers have KPIs and they are measured on time arrivals and departures of the line hauls. Our tolerance is 15 minutes from scheduled arrivals and departures" shared Dinesh through my email enquiry after the trip.

Several off-duty truckers who enjoyed my company later convinced me to try their local brew despite me trying to bluff them that I was here to also spend some time behind the wheel of the truck, which they easily realized was not true.

As it got dark and still drizzling, we set-off and immediately got on the G7211 Nanyou Expressway, by passing Ping Xiang, a county-level administrative division of mainland China.

I am quick to doze off after the local Chinese wine and am frequently awakened during driver change every 3-4 hours. "Driver change is governed by local statutory requirements and TNT's internal health and safety regulations" shared Dinesh of TNT.

I am travelling by nightfall through most part of the mountainous terrain Guangxi's province, in the far south of China. Many rivers cut valleys through the mountains. Most of these rivers form the tributary basin of the West River.

The roads are smooth and lay-by rest areas most adequate to refresh yourself as we continue our journey by-passing Nanning most of the night and on the G80, Guangwu Expressway.





Into Guangdong Province

When morning comes, we are just coming through Guangdong province, the most populous province in China with over 100 Million. Located in the southern part of the country, our truck soon crosses the scenic Jinma Bridge which is a major bridge in the expressway from Zhaoqing to Guangzhou.

Here the rivers still play an integral transport channel in the Pearl River Delta in Southern China.

We're now on the G15 aka the 2nd ring road travelling around the city to heading towards Shenzhen which is another 3 hours journey.

I am unable to continue my journey to Shenzhen and opt to be dropped off in the outskirts of Guangzhou, the third largest Chinese city and southern China's largest city. As of the 2010 census, the city had a population of 12.78 million

Fuel Type	Vietnam		China		Malaysia	
Diesel	RM	3.41	RM	3.79	RM	1.90
RON 93	RM	3.76	RM	4.11	RM	2.10
	(RON92)					
RON 97	RM	3.83	RM	4.46	RM	2.80
	(RON95)					

exchange rate @ 30/Sep/2013



I'm off at Guangzhou

As I reminisce this more than 1000km journey in a taxi to my destination in Shendu, I look back with a tinge of sadness of the bond I had just developed with the truck drivers.

They were ever so courteous and wonderful hosts. Ultimately they ensured that not only the truck, payload and driver were safe but their guest looked after and cared for.

Coordination and good communication is vital when handling international freighting operations as you're as good as your weakest link and the one weak link can thwart the entire supply chain process.

The journey raised my respect for humanity, machine and the environment. When a parcel is delivered to our door step, how many of us are privileged to appreciate the enormous work with goes on in the background by such companies as TNT.



"Devindran is a 23-year "young" veteran in the Malaysian automotive industry and held several senior management positions. He is now the principal of his own company, ACS AsiaPac Sdn Bhd focusing on Aftersales Training, Consulting and raising the overall image of the Aftersales stakeholders. For information on upcoming programs, log on to www.acsasiapac.com"

