

Management & Leadership

Korea puts best boot forward as G-20 chiefs gather

PATRICK BULGER

AS WORLD leaders buckle under the sheer weight of South Korean hospitality at the Group of 20 summit in Seoul next week, I trust they will find time to raise a glass to war. After all, not only is Korea a child of war but it's still at war with North Korea, obviously absent from this gathering of the successful and more-or-less rational.

Come to think of it, a good many of the nations to be represented at the summit have

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at one time or another either been at war with each other, or with others not on the guest list. Russia and Japan are still at war, while China lives in a state of high-pitched tension with most of those it hasn't bought off yet. And the two Koreas, belligerents in perpetuity, don't recognise each other and have therefore never declared war on the other, and so can't sign peace agreements.

Still, the ever-present threat of military meltdown has done wonders for South Korea, a vibrant and up-and-coming little republic, now a democracy and a shining example of the heights a nation can reach if it can turn out a decent washing machine.

Armed with brands Samsung, LG and Hyundai to name just three, this thriving little Asian commonwealth is testament to the liberating power of free markets and trade.

Purists of democracy will, I know, point out that 30 years of military dictatorship and a \$57bn bail-out from the International Monetary Fund more fully explain the spring in the step of this juvenile gadgetocracy, and they may be right. Still, it's hard not to contrast the prosperity south of the 38th parallel with the misery to its north, with its mad leader firing dud rockets and carrying on like the drunken uncle at a family wedding.

Fortunately for both Koreas, and indeed the region as a whole, while the air is full of bellicosity and verbal aggression, war is quite rare, although a state of diplomatic agitation is the norm — in the main over the hundreds of islands in the surrounding seas (and which "global warming" will take care of in the next few years anyway).

Just recently, Beijing cancelled a proposed summit with Tokyo because of a dispute over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, where the Japanese recently detained a Chinese fisherman.

"This has destroyed the proper atmosphere for a meeting of the two nations' leaders in Hanoi," sulked China's Xinhua news agency.

And this week Russian President Dmitry Medvedev happened to drop in on the Kuril Islands (Russian-inhabited after being invaded by Stalin, two days after the US dropped the bomb on Japan in 1945).

"Extremely regrettable," said Japan of the visit, "it hurts our national sentiment."

Japan's "national sentiment" will have been greatly buffed by the US having Boeing and Lockheed retrofit antimissile systems for its navy, just in case you-know-who in green pyjamas gets any bright ideas in the ballistics department.

Anyway, expect seamless and breathless TV coverage of the big Seoul event, an anticlimax, I'm sure, but it should look good on the CVs of the thousands of hacks who will be there, or as close to "there" as you get to these things nowadays.

Personally, from my couch I'll be rooting for the protesters, and apparently South Korea is something of a world champion in dissent, averaging 11 000 protests a year. Among the methods recorded to have been used are: dropping one's pants, flag-eating, ripping a pig apart, beheading dummies, appearing in public covered in thousands of bees, carrying torchlights and burning holy books.

Eccentric, I know, but is there any other way of shaking the global neoliberal project to its foundations?

Bulger has always wanted to be in TV but has been stuck in the print media for 250 years.

A bag lady with a gift for fashion and business

Unimpressed by famous brands, she began her own, writes Penny Haw

HANDBAGS are big. They are also big business, an industry that is slavishly supported by the largely feminine predisposition to own not just one or two sling bags, totes, clutches, purses, satchels or duffel bags but, says research conducted by Mintel, more than 20 per woman.

What's more, the average number of handbags per capita is growing.

Presided over by high fashion — which these days dictates not only that "it-bags" should be big enough to carry a BlackBerry, an iPad, a Kindle, a MacBook Air, a copy of Herschelle Gibbs's biography and a change of clothing, but also that they feature enough bling (known as "bag-porn" by fashion critics) to be identifiable across a rugby field — most hip styles of handbags have the longevity of a muffin. As a result, these one-season wonders are more frequently replaced than were more classic styles of the past. Add to this the fashion commandment, "thou shalt tote a bag to tally with every outfit", and the number of bags required increases exponentially.

Moreover, if you are a real "bag slag" and therefore, by definition, faithful to genuine brands of Hermès, Dior, Gucci, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and the like, your quest to keep a handle on bag fashion comes at a hefty price. While most will set you back thousands of rand, the really well-heeled (and bagged)

among us shoulder items like the Hermès Birkin diamond-studded platinum handbag, which goes for \$1.9m.

Not everyone, though, is impressed by pricey brand name bags whose qualities arguably begin and end with their labels. That unimpressedness is what prompted Cape-based entrepreneur Majda Rabin to begin designing her own handbags three years ago.

"I wanted something stylish and preferably in ostrich leather, which is not only wonderfully South African, but also has beautiful texture and interesting patterns that add exquisite detail to designs," she says. "Everything I came across, however, was too showy and trendy for my taste and/or far too expensive. So I began designing my own."

At the time, Rabin was an operations manager at Old Mutual. Although this daughter of a clothing designer had enjoyed being creative as a youngster — and even designed and made her own clothing — Rabin was determined to pursue a career in economics.

"My parents, who were both in the clothing industry, worked incredibly hard. Having observed this during my childhood, I decided life would be easier if I studied economics and got a well-paying job with a big company. I went to the University of the Western Cape, got a BCom and was lucky to get a great position at Old Mutual."

She was with the company

for almost 15 years when, frustrated by her preferred styles of bags not being available, she began dabbling in handbag design in her spare time. She tracked down a supplier of ostrich leather and took her design to a small company in Woodstock that agreed to manufacture the bag.

"I was impressed by the skills and experience of bag manufacturers in Cape Town, and their willingness to help me create the perfect bag. They shared their knowledge freely and were excited by my ideas. It was an encouraging first step."

Ostrich leather is not only wonderfully South African, but also has beautiful texture and interesting patterns

Also reassuring was the response to her prototype from friends, who promptly placed orders for their own versions. Rabin began researching the possibility of turning her hobby into a business and it was not long before she resigned from Old Mutual.

"Although my manager convinced me to stay on for almost a full year after I had handed in my notice, and my mother did her utmost to get me to change my mind, I was certain I could make a success out of producing a range of

elegant ostrich leather bags for women who like timeless, understated styles and who are discerning about quality."

At the beginning of last year, Rabin began producing her Chimpel range full time. By this time, she had established relationships with first-rate tanneries in the Karoo and worked with two leather manufacturers in Cape Town. It was time to begin trading in earnest and her first marketing endeavour was to exhibit at Design Indaba in Cape Town.

"It was a real baptism of fire," she laughs. "Suddenly I appreciated how much goes into marketing, something that I now realise is easy to take for granted when you are part of a big corporation. When you start your own business, you have to do everything yourself and learn how to do it really quickly. I concede I made a number of calls to my ex-colleagues at Old Mutual for guidance."

The show provided good exposure for Chimpel. Positive reaction to her designs reassured Rabin that, despite having been advised against creating only what she liked personally, her styles were finding the sweet spot.

"Someone told me early in the process that I should avoid designing just what I like and instead try to establish what the market requires."

"I'm glad, though, I followed my instinct in that regard. It seemed from the onset that what I was getting right was the



LOCAL GIRL: Majda Rabin is a Cape Town woman who gave up a secure job to design handbags that suited her taste. She now exports a variety of luxury leather accessories.

balance between originality, functionality and appeal."

In addition to taking orders at Design Indaba, Rabin also made contact with the Cape Craft Design Institute, a section 21 company that aims to grow craft as an economic sector in the Western Cape, and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) while at the event. "These organisations

provided me with valuable information, direction and support. What's more, it was at the show that the DTI asked me to consider showing my range at the Ambiente trade fair, which exhibits new designs and trends in Frankfurt."

So, after less than a year of full production, Chimpel was successfully launched both locally and internationally, which

resulted in orders from retailers in SA and Austria. But, says Rabin, despite the good response to her products, she continued to wrestle with the unfamiliar challenges of running a small business on her own.

It was not long, however, before her entrepreneurial endeavours came to the attention of the enterprise development, corporate social investment and skills training organisation Fetola & Associates, which is funded by the embassy of Finland. Chimpel qualified for Fetola's small and medium-size enterprise accelerator programme, which has proved invaluable.

"The workshops, networking opportunities and coaching that I have access to via Fetola have taught me a great deal. For example, I have learned how to manage my time when providing estimates for prospective clients. It is so tempting, as an enthusiastic, new entrepreneur, to drop everything in pursuit of new business."

"Anton Ressel (senior consultant at Fetola) taught me how to be more discerning when chasing new business and coached me on how to handle requests for consignment orders and the like."

"In addition to having access to the consultants and workshops, I am also able to network with other participants on the programme. We share many of the same problems and it is wonderful to be able to discuss solutions."

Rabin is fast making a name for herself in the world of luxury leather accessories. She has expanded her range to include wallets, purses and belts, and hopes to build sales next year by establishing agency agreements.

"My real vision is to prove that an African brand can be aspirational and luxurious in an understated, elegant and original way. I want to demonstrate that handbags don't have to be big to be big."

Saving the planet by moving off-planet

FOR a long time, the Challenger space shuttle disaster of 1986 seemed to have ended our dream of space flight's ever expanding beyond the preserve of state-funded missions and a few highly trained explorers.

People of my generation thought the moon landings had signified the start of a great expansion of space travel, but those dreams were shattered by the deaths of the six crew and Christa McAuliffe, a school teacher who was the first non-astronaut to join a space mission.

At last, technology is about to change all that. Virgin Galactic and a small group of privately funded rivals are on the brink of launching a new space age. Together with Scaled Composites, our engineering partners, we are developing a low-energy access system capable of propelling ships into space for a fraction of the current cost. By launching ships from the atmosphere rather than from the ground, we will minimise the effect on the environment, and some day make the trip into space as commonplace as crossing an ocean is now.

Most industries have gone through tremendous changes in the past 40 years, and space travel is long overdue for a similar overhaul. A shuttle launch costs about \$1bn. Even launching a small, 180kg satellite costs at least \$30m. This is limiting our ability to access space for industrial purposes.

This barrier to the development of industry in space is important, as the continued exploration of space and development of related technologies will be key to human survival in the next 100 years. Satellites that monitor changing weather patterns and their effect help us to deal with problems of overpopulation and climate change, such as food shortages — earlier warnings to farmers in affected regions would help to save crops and conserve resources.

Today we have the capacity to use off-planet solar panels to generate power, which can be used on the planet below and also to power industry in space — server farms, for example, and some kinds of factories. An industrial revolution of this nature would help us in the battle against climate change, removing both the need to generate power and some significant sources of heat and pollution. Sadly, this advance has been delayed by our reliance on expensive, nonreusable



Richard Branson

launch systems designed half a century ago.

This is where space tourism comes into the picture. Our 380 customers have already made more than \$50m in deposits, providing part of the justification for our likely investment of more than \$450m in developing Virgin Galactic's unique system of air-released space planes.

Our astronauts come from all walks of life. Ranging from artists and scientists to entrepreneurs and financiers, they share one dream: seeing the planet and experiencing weightlessness while helping to pioneer a new approach to space travel.

This is not an easy project. To aid the effort, in 2004 the Bush administration set up a regulatory framework that will ensure we develop safety standards that inspire confidence. In time, other governments will do the same.

Scaled Composites is not the only company designing new launch systems. Elon Musk, CEO and chief technology officer of Space X, is developing a new ground-based rocket that will be capable of revolutionising the economics of shuttling to the International Space Station.

Boeing, in partnership with Space Adventures, has announced similar plans, partly relying on space tourism to help fund its venture. Other companies may enter the market in order to fulfil the need to protect the environment by moving industry off-planet.

Space travel isn't just the stuff of science fiction or something that might happen in the distant future. It will help us develop practical solutions for some of our biggest problems, and that, combined with our innate curiosity, will inspire all of us to someday reach for the stars — I hope, almost literally!

Branson, founder of the Virgin Group, blogs on www.virgin.com/richard-branson/blog. You can follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/richardbranson>. Questions from readers will be answered in future columns. Please send them to branson@bdfm.co.za.

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