

Made in China

Bull in a China shop? Andy Stewart heads to the IAG factory in Shenzhen to see first hand how Chinese manufacturing is changing the face of the audio industry.

Earlier in the year, while checking through my emails one morning, I came across what I initially thought was junk mail: "Dear Andrew. You are cordially invited to visit us at our factory headquarters in Shenzhen, where we hope to show you – and other fellow guests – through our hi-tech manufacturing plant, entirely at our expense. All you have to do is pack your bags, along with some spending money; we'll organise the rest." Or words to that effect anyway.

I couldn't believe it. Someone was seriously inviting me on a free trip to China. "Surely there's been a mistake?" I thought. But there was no mistake. I was to be the guest of International Audio Group (IAG) – the company that principally manufactures Wharfedale and Quad – to investigate Chinese manufacturing first hand. I couldn't pass it up...

So there I was a week later at Sydney airport, borrowed suitcase in hand (thanks Rick), meeting my fellow travelling companions for the first time, and preparing for a trip into what can only be described as 'the great unknown'. I really had no idea what to expect; I was nervous, excited, fascinated and daunted by what lay ahead, but once the wheels left the tarmac there was no turning back.

When I finally arrived in Hong Kong, after spending several hours on the flight boring one of my fellow travelling companions to death with some 'back-to-the-drawing-board' Mandarin that I was hastily parroting out of my Lonely Planet 'How to Speak Mandarin' guide-book, we were picked up by our driver, hustled into a vehicle and driven off as if our lives depended on it, flat chat down the freeway and into mainland China. As I stared out the window at the strange landscape I was reminded of all the episodes of *Monkey* I'd watched as a kid. It was oddly colourless and hazy, and if there were trees out in those hills they must have been very short.

My first strange encounter was at an immigration checkpoint along the freeway, where we had to present our passports and rely on our driver-cum-interpreter to explain to the utterly humourless border guards who we were and why we were here. It was all being conducted in Mandarin so I was clueless – and helpless – but I was fascinated to know; "What was our stated business here?" After I'd had my temperature taken by a guard who pointed a pistol-like thermometer at my head, checking me for symptoms of SARS and Bird Flu, I was really beginning to wonder myself. I reflected upon this question for the remainder of the drive, as our car travelled into China at speeds that defied the standard description of our vehicle.

I had heard from one of our hosts that Shenzhen – our destina-



tion city – was a rice paddy 16 years ago, but was now a thriving metropolis of over six million people. Apparently Shenzhen had been 'commissioned' by Deng Xiaoping – one of China's key leaders instrumental in instigating the socialist modernisation of China – to service the many manufacturing companies in Hong Kong. On his proposal, four special economic zones were established in China and 14 coastal cities were opened to the outside world, in the hope of absorbing the world's capital and introducing its advanced technologies and managerial skills to the Chinese economy. Basically Shenzhen was designed and built to be one enormous factory. With that snippet of information and little else, my head was swimming with images of what this place might look like. Did 'one enormous factory' mean one giant tin roof extending to the horizon? And if so, where did that mean people lived and shopped and, I dunno, played ping-pong? And how the hell could a rice paddy become such an enormous city in such a short space of time?

The city of Shenzhen, it turned out, was effectively large apartment buildings and commercial skyscrapers as far as the eye could see, and beyond its tall fringes there was nothing. How it was built so quickly is, in a way, the essential difference between China and the West: once the decision is made to do something within the Central Government, it gets done... largely by hand.

So it was at the Wharfedale factory. As our 'Aussie Posse' drove though the gates of the IAG compound past the saluting armed guard positioned on a wooden box like a wind-up toy, I was struck by the truly medieval construction site not far away involving men with picks, shovels and ancient wheel-barrow – and nothing else – levelling an area about the size of a squarish cricket ground. As I absorbed the truly ancient scene in front of me, I was proudly told by someone in the car: "That area there used to be a hill once." I thought at first he was joking, but judging by the look on his face he clearly wasn't. China is a country where the concept of 'by hand' conjures images, not of a skilled individual lovingly crafting a product beyond the capabilities of a soulless production line, but rather, hundreds of men, young and old, removing a hill, pick by swinging pick. "Hadn't anyone ever heard of dynamite?" I thought to myself "...didn't they in fact invent explosives?" Manpower – actual physical mountain-moving manpower – is plentiful in China it would seem, but apparently machinery and TNT aren't.

After a warm welcome befitting royalty, which included much formal hand shaking, the tour of the factory began. Now, given that this was what I'd travelled thousands of miles to see, I



was very keen to take it all in. Our guide, R&D manager Steve Hewlett – an Englishman – happily showed us every nook and cranny of the place like it was a Universal Studio tour... for dweebs. However, when Steve said, “Okay let’s wander over here now into the second factory,” suddenly it struck me that this place was huge! Two factories soon became 10, and each was geared up to play a specific role in the production process.

As we travelled through the various speaker assembly areas – the facility, incidentally, manufactures every component, even the paper for the cones(!) – something began to shift in my mind that I hadn’t expected. This place wasn’t just ‘pumping out crap’ as everyone back home would assume. In fact, it was quite the opposite. This was a ‘by hand’ mass-production line where everyone’s job was carefully supervised, where quality control had been adopted with a systematic mastery and sophistication that I had arrogantly assumed only existed in places like Germany and Switzerland. Far from being a sweat-shop where unskilled workers shabbily constructed products that lasted barely long enough to exit the factory, the IAG facility obviously prided itself on making things well. The Wharfedale speaker cabinets for instance, are made by deftly skilled tradesmen and women who produce among the best-constructed pieces of furniture I’ve ever seen. The piano finishes are deep and flawless, the cabinet tolerances the tightest imaginable and the woods of the highest grade available on the market.

There were examples of this level of skill, artistry and attention to detail everywhere I looked, no matter *where* I looked. Sure there were some pretty sad faces gazing up from the production lines at times, and God knows what some of them were thinking as they looked up from their benches at the long-haired white guy from ‘outer space’, but there were none of the shoddy, messy, chaotic or incompetent work practices that I had half-expected to see. Everything was supremely organised; the ‘manned’ production lines as refined and technically advanced as any I’d seen.

It made me understand one thing about China that hadn’t occurred to me. It taught me that most things we misguidedly attribute to Chinese manufacturing – shoddy finishing, bad componentry and cheap imitation – are in fact, the result of each individual company’s economic intention, not Chinese incompetence. If something needs to be built well – if the desire and the expenditure and the intentions are there – a product can be built brilliantly in China. I know this because I’ve seen it with my own eyes. The sense we have of ourselves as technically superior

and, at least in terms of manufacturing, more refined, is in many ways an out-of-date notion and little more than a thinly veiled racial slur.

It’s almost reminiscent of the days when ‘Made in Japan’ was used as a kind of generalised racial backhander across the face of any product made in that country. It wasn’t until long after Japan had been making high-quality goods that the phrase took on an entirely new meaning. These days those same three words are synonymous with excellence of manufacture and hi-tech wizardry. The same cyclical process is occurring right now in China. As a nation, China is absorbing skills and knowledge from the rest of the world like a gigantic sponge and its production values are on a steep ascent. What this means politically for the rest of the world is hard to surmise in a few words, but I left the country convinced that we’d all better start brushing up on our Mandarin. What effect this will have on the environment, both locally in places like Shenzhen, and globally, may well be disastrous though because it’s hard to see where all this pollution (and audio gear) ultimately goes. Frankly, that aspect of what I saw on my trip was quite disturbing, and it was abundantly clear as I wandered around the city that half the world’s companies are moving their manufacturing to China not just because of labour costs, but because environmental concerns appear to be almost non-existent there. It’s interesting to note that MDF is banned in several states in the US, meanwhile in Shenzhen there was an exhaust port eight feet high pumping the dust out into the open air. And as for Hong Kong harbour, if there’s a more polluted body of water in the world I’d like to see it... correction, I never want to see it. I went wakeboarding there just before I came home, and after my first session in the water, someone remarked that I was pulling off some pretty fancy tricks, when in reality all I was doing was dodging driftwood, glass bottles, plastic bags, fluorescent globes, nappies and who knows what else that was in the water that day – and they were the things you *could* see. Thank God most of our old audio equipment at least has the good grace to sink to the bottom.

IAG’s level of quality control and excellence of manufacture is still, however, an exception, not the rule in China. While I was away I bought several watches – all rip-offs – only one of which now works a few months later, a jacket that has almost entirely unravelled, a briefcase that has two busted zips and a locking mechanism that jammed on day one, and a suitcase with an extendable handle which embarrassingly broke off as I was coming out of customs and immigration in full view of hundreds of people at a busy Sydney airport who were craning their necks to see if I was their son/father/brother returning from overseas. “Bloody Chinese crap!” I muttered to myself. “You’d never see something this dodgy being manufactured in Australia.”

So next time you find yourself trotting out the old cliché that all gear made in China is inferior because of *where* it’s made and *who* makes it, think again. China’s not a sleepy giant waking up, it’s well and truly awoken, and its skill levels and sophisticated manufacturing techniques are fast overtaking us. It’s no accident that Toyota has just signed a multi-billion dollar deal to build its hi-tech Prius hybrid car in China. With an eight-speaker JBL sound system and no engine noise, I am deeply envious of this car. Does anyone have a mate who works at Toyota?

